Mahagaba

The Equine Undead

Mahagaba was a white clydesdale; a breed known for their thick build and strength. Mahagaba, however, was born with a deformity. His front right leg was underdeveloped and small, like that of a normal horse. The leg wasn't long enough to touch the ground while standing, yet Mahagaba managed to hobble around on it when necessary. Despite his handicap, he was smart and well-tempered.

Seamus McCabe though he was getting another strong workhorse to help around the ranch when he discovered that old Bessie was pregnant with Mahagaba. Upon seeing the newly born foal in Bessie's stable stall, Seamus knew that Mahagaba would only be a burden. Mahagaba wouldn't be able to pull heavy loads, and nobody would be able to ride him. Seamus wouldn't even be able to sell Mahagaba; nobody would buy him.

Seamus wanted to put down Mahagaba, but his wife Karen wouldn't allow it. Karen had no children, so the horses where her babies. She took Mahagaba under her wing, and tried to give him a good life.

If an animal didn't help the ranch then it shouldn't be on the ranch, according to Seamus. Mahagaba was often left without food, standing in his own flth because his stall hadn't been cleaned. He could spend days in his stall without being let out. When Karen found out, Seamus would say that he just forgot. He hadn't forgot.

McCabe Ranch was also a riding school. Some of the students would take pity on Mahagaba and feed him sugar cubes. Others seemed to share Seamus's dislike for the creature, and would pester Mahagaba out of boredom.

As if the gods hadn't been cruel enough, Mahagaba died at the age of four. He had discovered how to unlatch the door to his stall, and was awkwardly trotting around in the feld. A pair of boys thought it would be funny to throw rocks at the deformed horse. Startled, Mahagaba lost his footing on uneven ground and broke his good front leg. Seamus was the frst to fnd him and, before Karen had a chance to meddle, he fred a shotgun cartridge into Mahagaba's head. Such is the fate of horses with broken legs.

Mahagaba was buried the next day, but he wasn't forgotten.

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“I need to piss really bad,” said Rex. “Pull over, man.”

Shaun stopped the car on the side of the long country road. Rex quickly jumped out to relieve himself. Nobody wanted to watch Rex do his business, but they couldn't help but look when they heard laughter. He was pissing on a horse.

“Don't do that!” said Bell.

“It's just a stupid horse. I bet he pisses on himself every day,” said Rex. “You love it, dontcha buddy!”

“I'm going out with an idiot,” said Bell. Nobody disagreed.

Rex got back into the car with a smile on his face. Bell sighed and shook her head.

“What? It's funny,” said Rex.

“Yeah, you're a real comedian,” said Kira. “I can't wait to watch you shit on a duck, or spew on a cow.”

Rex found both of those scenarios amusing.

“Oh man, that would be hilarious! Imagine just dropping your daks and shitting on a duck!” said Rex. He continued drivelling on about how various types of excrement would be funny on various animals, as they drove to the campsite.

The boys went off to gather firewood, leaving Bell and Kira to erect the tent.

“So, looks like you've caught yourself a real intellectual there,” said Kira.

“He's such an idiot. I don't know why I'm going out with him.”

“Would his six pack have anything to do with it?”

Bell laughed, blushing slightly.

“Yeah, I guess that might have something to do with it. He's alright. Not marriage material, but he's alright.”

“Don't tell him I said this, but he is a little bit funny actually,” said Kira.

“It's funny for a while, but you'll want to strangle him before this camping trip is over.”

They both laughed.

In the distance, Shaun and Rex were having a sword fight with two sticks. The boys were shouting at each other, and Kira was sure she heard something about being stabbed in the 'pirate vagina'.

“Oh god, I hope it doesn't rub off on Shaun,” said Bell.

It was sunset and the boys had started the fire, aided by a whole bottle of methylated spirits. Bell was delighted to spot a mob of brumbies walking through the bush. Kira and Bell both loved horses, and tried to approach the wild animals. The brumbies spooked easily, and trotted away before the girls could get close. Bell told of how she used to go horse riding at McCabe Ranch, quite close to their campsite. The girls both agreed that they should start taking lessons again.

After dinner, the boys drank beer and the girls drank wine late into the night. Shaun and Kira were the first to go to sleep. Rex and Bell shared some time alone before putting out the fire.

Rex climbed into the tent and crawled on top of Bell.

“You know, I'm a bit like a horse... in the pants,” said Rex, “you can have a lesson riding me if you want.”

“How romantic,” said Bell, “with smooth lines like that, how can I resist?”

Bell pulled off Rex's shirt. They kissed. Rex took off Bell's top, and started undoing her bra. As they fondled each other in the darkness, Bell saw the silhouette of a horse on the side of the tent.

“The brumbies are back!” said Bell. She put her shirt back on as quickly as she could and stepped out of the tent, but the horse was nowhere to be seen. Rex stepped out of the tent with a sour expression on his face. He stood around, still and silent, as Bell continued to look for the horse.

“He's gotta be close. Where's the torch?” whispered Bell.

Rex didn't respond. Bell started rifling through one of her bags.

“Fuckin' horses. Who gives a shit.” said Rex. He kicked a rock, and stormed off towards the creek.

“Don't have a hissy fit. Fucking hell,” Bell said under her breath.

She found the torch and shone it around, but still couldn't find the horse. The other tent unzipped, and Kira poked her head out.

“Are you alright?” said Kira.

“Yeah, yeah. Rex is having a whinge because I saw a brumby. It's fine,” said Bell.

“Alright, goodnight then,” said Kira.

There was a loud painful yell, and then another. Kira and Bell looked at each other in surprise.

Bell ran towards the creek. She turned a corner and could see the outline of a horse rearing up, striking against a cliff face with its front hooves. She shone the light on the rocks, and there was Rex. His arms were covering his head, but they did little to shield him from the heavy blows. Bell screamed. The torch briefly shone on the beast. It was white, but it's skin was covered in lesions. It looked diseased.

“Stop! Stop!” screamed Bell as she ran towards Rex. The animal came back down to the ground and disappeared behind the corner of the cliff.

When Bell finally got to Rex, he was badly injured. He was unconscious, slumped against the rock wall. Bell shone the torch over his body to assess the damage, crying. His arms were heavily bruised, and there was a large red hoof mark on his forehead. On his chest there was a red patch of skin over obviously broken ribs.

Kira and Shaun came running down to the creek.  
“What happened?” asked Kira.  
“I don't know! There was a horse and it was kicking him and kicking him and I yelled stop and it ran away but he's hurt and we have to get to a hospital,” said Bell.

“I'll get the car,” said Shaun before dashing back to the campsite.

Kira was crouched on the ground, trying to comfort Bell. Bell was the only one crying, but they were both scared. They kept looking over their shoulders, checking to see if the animal had returned. Shaun backed the car down the walkway to the creek, and stopped in front of the girls.

“Quick, get him in the car. It's an hour to the hospital,” said Shaun.

“Shouldn't we call an ambulance?” asked Kira.

“We can't. There's no reception out here. We have to drive until the phones work,” said Shaun.

Kira and Shaun carefully placed Rex in the back seat of the car. Bell was still sitting on the ground crying, so Kira helped her into the back seat as well.

Shaun hopped into the driver's seat and released the hand brake. When he looked up, the horse was there, right in the headlights, roughly 50 meters ahead.

Smears of blood and dirt covered it's body, and it's dead eyes reflected the headlights of the car. It had one short front leg, and the other was bent in an unnatural way; as if it had a second knee. The beast's jaw hung open, and flies buzzed around a bloodied wound on a sunken side of its skull. The wounded side had no eye, and the other eye was bulging out of the socket.

Shaun gasped, and the two girls saw it too. The monster painfully stumbled and staggered toward the car.

“It's blocking us. It's trying to kill us!” said Bell.

“Calm down,” said Shaun. “It's just a horse. I'm going to hit it.”

Bell looked at Kira, but neither of them knew what to do. Shaun put the car into first gear and slammed down the accelerator. The tyres spun wildly, kicking up dirt and rocks. The wheels steadily gained traction and the car leapt forwards toward the white beast.

Rex was slightly more awake; awake enough to cough up blood. Bell was holding him, sobbing and afraid. Nobody was wearing a seatbelt.

Shaun gripped the steering wheel tightly and grit his teeth, bracing for the impact. He blinked, expecting to hear the the sound of a tonne of metal crunch through the beast's ample flesh and bone. In that split second, the animal reared up and jumped.

The windscreen shattered as a mighty leg punched through it like a log. The hoof narrowly missed Shaun's head, and snapped the headrest clean off the driver's seat. The sheet of glass held together in one piece, but was shattered. Shaun hit the brakes as hard as he could and the sedan hydroplaned sideways into a tree, violently throwing the contents of the car into the air. The car spun around in a circle before it came to a stop.

Everyone looked at each other in shock for a moment, unable to speak or move. “Did I get him?” asked Shaun.

Bell and Rex cautiously stepped out of the wreckage and searched for the beast's body. They were too afraid to tend to Rex while the white monster was still around.

Bell opened the door and started awkwardly dragging Rex down the dirt road. She was crying loudly in a delirium.

“What are you doing?” said Kira.

“I'm taking him to the ranch,” said Bell in between sobbing. “I'm going to the ranch.”

Kira screamed. With a sudden stench of rotting meat in the air, Bell looked up to find the monster towering over her. The sight destroyed what was left of her sanity, and she curled up into the foetal position, gibbering with her eyes shut tightly.

Laying on his back, Rex groggily opened his eyes. He saw a massive hoof thunder down towards his face. It was the last thing he ever saw.

Bell scrambled through the dark bush as fast as her legs would take her. Thin branches and saplings scored her skin as she ran, but she was too distressed to notice. She emerged form the bush and jumped a barbed wire fence, landing in a familiar field. By either sheer luck or the subconscious help of a childhood memory, she had made it to McCabe Ranch. Bell took a quick glance back into the trees and couldn't see anything, but that didn't stop her from sprinting towards the house.

She arrived at the ranch house and beat her fist against the door, exhausted and yelling for help. A light turned on inside.

“Who are you? I'm calling the police,” came a woman's voice from behind the door.

“Please help me, we need an ambulance! My boyfriend is dying! He needs an ambulance!” said Bell. The woman cautiously opened the door, and the two stared at each other for a second. Bell's clothes and skin were littered with small cuts, and she had dead leaves in her hair.

“Come in and sit down,” said the woman after some hesitation.  
Bell was lead into the kitchen, and she sat on a wooden chair. The woman walked over to the phone.

“You need an ambulance?” asked the woman.

“Yes.”

“Ok, what should I tell them?”

“My boyfriend was attacked by a horse. He's unconscious.”

“By a horse?”

“Yes, by a horse! Call the fucking ambulance!”

The woman frowned and dialled 000.

“Hello, I've got a very upset young lady here who says her boyfriend was attacked by a horse and he needs an ambulance,” said the woman, and then gave her address.

“Well he's unconscious. Wait, I'll put her on the phone,” said the woman. “They want to know what his injuries are.”

Bell picked up the phone and explained everything that happened. The woman watched on, listening to Bell talk. “I... I ran to get help. Please come quickly...” Bell said, trailing off into sobbing.

She dropped the phone and slumped back into her chair. The woman picked up the dangling phone, said goodbye, and hung up.

“The ambulance will be here soon, love. We can't do anything until they get here, so you just have a sit,” said the woman. She shuffled over to the sink, turned on the kettle, and put teabags in two cups.

“Was it a white horse?” asked the woman.

Bell lifted her head from her hands. “Yeah,” she said, “it was.”

“Did it have a little leg?”  
Everything had happened so quickly. Bell tried to remember how it looked in the headlights. It did have a small leg.

“How did you know that?” said Bell. The woman was hesitant to answer, but Bell realised that she had seen the horse before.

“Oh my god. It's Mahagaba,” said Bell. Now the woman looked surprised.

“I'm Karen McCabe, and this is McCabe Ranch. Where you a student here?” asked the woman. Bell realised that she had also met Karen before, 14 years ago.

“But I thought Mahagaba was dead. He was put down, wasn't he?” asked Bell.

“Well, yes, he is dead... I think. But I've seen him.”

Karen told Bell all she knew about Mahagaba. Shortly after Mahagaba's death, Seamus McCabe had died of a heart attack, and a student had died in an accident. Because of this, Karen decided to shut down the riding school. This much Bell already knew, but she didn't know of the circumstances surrounding the deaths.

Seamus kept finding horses wandering around at night that had escaped the stable. He eventually put locks on the stall doors, which seemed to fix the problem. One night, he saw another escaped horse and went to capture it. Karen found Seamus dead in the field an hour later, and none of the horses were missing from the stable.

The student who died in a riding accident was out in the bush by himself. The boy had taken a hoof to the chest, and his horse was still nearby. The horse was well tempered, and Karen didn't believe it would do such a thing.

Karen would occasionally see a white horse, in the trees at night. It even appeared to limp when it walked. She was sure it was Mahagaba.

“He's not a bad horse, you know,” said Karen. “He was just treated badly all his life. I still leave sugar cubes in his stall sometimes, and they're usually gone in the morning. Never seen him walk into the stable, mind you.”

Bell was speechless. An undead horse? Such a notion seemed ridiculous, yet she couldn't deny what she had seen with her own eyes.

“My friends are still out there,” said Bell, “are they going to be OK?”

“I hope so. I've been out in the field plenty of times, and he's never come near me. I don't know what's gotten into him.”

Bell was growing more worried. What happened to Rex, Kira, and Shaun? She remembered seeing Mahagaba above her, then running into the bush. Everything else was a blur.

“I have to go find them,” said Bell.

“What about the ambulance? It'll be here soon. You're safe here.”

Bell sat in silence, deciding whether she had the courage to go back into the bush.

“No, I have to find them. Maybe I can save them. They don't know where this ranch is.”

Karen sighed. “Take a quad bike then. I'll wait for the ambulance here.”

“I don't know how to ride a quad bike.”

“Hmm... then take a horse.”

Bell galloped out onto the road, and back towards the campsite. She felt a little safer on a horse than on foot. She saw the car ahead, and slowed to a canter. With one glance at Rex's crushed skull, she vomited. The horse kept moving, and Bell allowed it to. The tears came back. She brushed what vomit she could off her clothes and the horse, and didn't dare look back.

She trotted past the campsite. No sign of Kira or Shaun. She fought the urge to turn and run, and plucked up the courage to call out.

“Kira? Shaun?” she said, as she trotted toward the creek.

“Help.”

It was Kira. Her voice was soft and timid. Bell couldn't discern where the sound had come from.

“Please help us, oh please...” repeated Kira, and Bell looked up at the top of the cliff. There stood Kira and Shaun frozen still.

Bell turned the horse around and made her way back up to the camp site as fast as she could. She found a path that lead to the top of the rock wall and trotted cautiously followed it. She turned a bend, and there was Mahagaba. Kira and Shaun were trapped near the cliff's edge with no way to escape.

“Mahagaba,” beckoned Bell with a shaky voice. “Here Mahagaba.”

The rotting horse responded and turned to face Bell. He hobbled over to within arms length. Bell opened up one of the saddle bags and pulled out some sugar cubes.

“Here boy,” she said, extending a quivering arm.

Mahagaba sniffed at her hand, and licked up the cubes. His breath was putrid.

“Good boy,” she said, attempting to stroke Mahagaba. His skin felt slightly slimy, and every stroke smeared blood from the horse's lesions, but he seemed to like it. Bell vomited again slightly. She continued to stroke Mahagaba. Kira and Shaun just watched on, amazed and unsure what to do.

Kira was the first to make a move. She slowly approached Mahagaba from the side.

“Good... boy,” said Kira. She too started stroking the horse on his neck, before slowly retreating behind Bell's horse.

“Come on, Shaun,” said Bell.  
Shaun moved towards Mahagaba's rear.  
“No! Don't get behind him, you'll startle him. Come around the front,” said Bell, pulling out more sugar cubes.

Shaun froze, then took a few steps backward and slowly made his way towards Mahagaba's head. Shaun saw maggots in Mahagaba's empty eye socket and suddenly turned away in disgust. Mahagaba hobbled backwards and stamped his legs anxiously. There was a fragile tension in the air, threatening to snap and unleash mayhem.

“Fucking!” said Bell as a reflex. She restrained herself. “Careful. No sudden movements.”

“Give me some of those,” whispered Shaun, gesturing his head subtly towards Bell's sugar cubes.

“I can't throw them, it might spook him. Back away from him.”

Everyone was on edge, even the horses. They froze, trying to stabilise the situation. Then the ambulance arrived; lights flashing and siren blaring.

Bell was bucked off her horse as it reared up in fright. Mahagaba followed suit.

“Oh shit!” yelled Shaun. He curled up into a ball on the ground, vocalising his fear with random vowels. Mahagaba planted his feet on the ground and galloped over Shaun, before leaping off the cliff's edge.

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The paramedic said that it was probably a rabid brumby. The police couldn't find the horse's body. Even if it survived, the rabies would kill it soon enough, they were told. Bell just went along with the story. They would call her insane if she told them about Mahagaba. Maybe she had gone temporarily insane, she thought to herself. Maybe it was just a rabid wild horse.

Kira, Shaun and Bell were wrapped in blankets, sitting in the back of the ambulance. As the ambulance was leaving, Bell looked out the window. A white horse was watching from the trees in the distance.