

Around The Barrel

By Charlie Perrett, grade 5

“HONK! Quack Quack Honk!” went the ducks and geese demanding for their breakfast in the yard. “I’m coming!” yelled 14 year old Cindy, hurrying outside before they started tearing down the cottage door.

It was a beautiful morning, dew droplets clung to everything in sight. The sun just barely peeked over the rolling hills of Ever Greens Farm in Canada. When the fingers of light licked at the droplets, it made them sparkle like frost. Cindy quickly snatched up the feed bucket, the handle was wet with dew and slipped in her hands. She stuck her hand in and showered the ground with corn and grain. The ducks and geese went crazy for the food. Cindy laughed at them, her voice filled with happiness as she watched them dive for the same kernel, then stop in their tracks as they realize they both want the same piece. Cindy’s golden hair shook as she laughed, and her deep blue eyes sparkled. “Now you guys better not fight over your food” she said, shaking her finger at them “I need to get ready for the rodeo.”

Just as she turned back to the house, she heard someone shout behind her “what’s so funny?” She whirled around and saw her best friend Nicholas’ grinning face peeking out from behind a bush. “You were spying on me again, weren't you?” said Cindy. Nicholas grinned mischievously, his dark hazel eyes twinkled. “I came over to wish you good luck on the

rodeo today” he said excitedly. Cindy and her beautiful jet black stallion Freedom had a rodeo that day in barrel racing.

Ever since Freedom’s mom had died in a bad foaling, Cindy had nursed the sickly little black colt back to health. They had become inseparable and were now a fearful barrel racing team. Freedom wouldn't let anyone else touch him, nevertheless ride him. “You guys will knock their socks off,” said Nicholas with gusto.

“Cindy, has Freedom had his bath yet?” Cindy's mom Rose hollered from the kitchen later that afternoon. “Yes” she yelled back “I just need to give him a quick brush before we go.” Cindy raced down the stairs and flew out the door, snatching an apple on her way. Her blonde hair flew out behind her in the wind as she raced through the yard.

It was a lovely afternoon, the birds sang in the leafy poplar trees and the grass crunched softly under her feet. “Today’s the day Freedom!” she said, her voice bubbling with excitement. She gave him the apple on the palm of her hand, Freedom took it from her gently. Cindy snatched up Freedom's brush and ran it over his silken black coat as he crunched on the juicy apple. She circled around and came up to his head. Cindy lightly ran her fingers over the snow white blaze that ran through his face and over his nose like a swiftly flowing river. She lovingly placed her head against his and kissed his velvety nose. “Here, have fun in the meadow until it’s time to go” she said quietly as she swung open the creaky wooden gate. Freedom nickered softly and gracefully loped out into the peaceful meadow.

Cindy sighed happily and walked back to their little cottage to get dressed. She hopped up the stairs and into her room where her clothes sat ready on her bed, she quickly slipped them on. Her grandpa's cowboy hat hung on her golden horse shoe hook where it always was, she picked it up and sighed.

Her grandpa had been a great horse breaker and they had been very close. Freedom's mom, Moonshine, had been her grandpa's favourite mare. That was one of the reasons Cindy had been so determined that Freedom should live. Cindy carefully placed the hat on her head, and quickly wove her golden hair into a thick braid at the back of her head, tucking in her lucky bead. It was white and had plastic jewels covering it.

Finally, it was time to go. Cindy went over to where Freedom was grazing quietly, stuck her fingers in her mouth and let out a clear shrill whistle. Along came Freedom galloping across the pasture. Cindy loaded him into their trailer and then slid into the passenger seat beside her mom. She pumped her fists in the air and shouted "READY! SET! RODEO!"

Once Cindy and Freedom had signed in, they were sent to the back of the rodeo until it was their turn to perform. Cindy anxiously watched run after run of riders expertly guide their horses around the course. One pair was especially good. It was a young lady with dark brown hair, a sour frown and a spirited brown and white pinto with a silky mane. The girl guided her horse so close to the barrel it looked as if she was touching it. As the show continued Cindy got more and more worried. It seemed as if they would never call her name!

Finally she heard it. "Cindy Taylor and her horse Freedom!" the loud speaker boomed over the stands. Cindy leaned forward into the saddle, clicked her tongue and kicked Freedom lightly with her heels. Freedom took off like a bullet. They flew towards the first barrel. Cindy quickly picked up the flow and rhythm of Freedom's surging body under her. They rounded the first barrel in a perfect tight cut around, then raced toward the second. The two of them seemed to be moving as one. It was a wonderful sight: the pretty, talented, young girl with the glossy yellow braid, like woven sunshine, atop her strong beautiful black mount with the white blaze down his fine, intelligent face, like moonshine on a lake!

Nicholas had come to watch and was wearing his cowboy hat. He was trying desperately to whistle like Cindy, but failing miserably. He gave up the attempt and instead grabbed his cowboy hat off his head and started waving it around in the air like a madman and whooping loudly!

They raced up to the second barrel. Cindy expertly guided Freedom around the barrel far enough away so that they wouldn't knock it down, but so close that they wouldn't lose time. They left that barrel in the dust and headed for the last one. She leaned forward in the saddle, Freedom flowing under her like water. The home stretch back across the line was when they really shone. Cindy gave a clear sharp whistle and shouted "come on boy show 'em what you're made of!"

Freedom needed nothing more but the sound of her voice. Away he went, leaving the last barrel behind as fast as he could lay his feet to the ground.

They flew past the line! Cindy pumped her fists in the air with victory, or so she hoped. She suddenly realized that if they didn't slow down, they might ride through the wall. So, she shifted her weight so that she sat heavy in the saddle, gently tugging on the reins. Freedom did not want to stop, but he just snorted his complaints loudly and slowed to a high stepping trot, then to a walk.

It had all happened so fast it seemed as if only seconds ago she had arrived at the rodeo, filled with the jitters. Still a smile played on Cindy's lips as she went to rub down Freedom.

Cindy waited in the entrance of the barrel racing course where the red, blue, and white barrels still stood as they had when rider after rider had skillfully weaved their horses through them. The sun was low in the sky with the shadow of the moon in the distance. They were calling the winners of the barrel racing division.

Cindy waited in the line with all of the other competitors, her fingers crossed and her eyes closed tight. Freedom, not too sure what everyone was afraid of, started tossing his head up and down and snorting quietly, his mane flowing like a black lake.

The loud speaker began to talk, thanking the crowd for coming and other useless stuff. Finally, to all of their relief, he started to announce the winners. "IN THIRD WE HAVE LIZZY AND SPIRIT." A young girl, maybe 13-14 years old, with shiny brown hair and eyes to match headed into the arena riding a dainty light bay mare with a sensitive little face and intelligent

eyes. They rode in at a high stepping trot and went all the way around, the girl waved and smiled broadly, the horse whinnied.

“IN SECOND WE HAVE JANE AND SAGE.” The girl with the brown and white pinto cantered out. Her pinto's glossy coat shone in the setting sun and his eyes flamed with spirit. The girl did not look happy with second and still had her sour frown on.

Now Cindy was so excited she was shivering even through the warm rays of sunlight and her long sleeved plaid shirt. The girl on the pinto was who she had thought her real competition had been. “Still, someone else could have won” thought Cindy, trying not to get her hopes too high. Cindy bit her lip waiting.

“AND IN FIRST WE HAVE ... CINDY AND FREEDOM!!!” Cindy was so excited she was trembling. They entered the ring in a proud high stepping trot then entered a swift graceful canter. Cindy saw the girl in second place watching from the side with a frown that was quickly replaced with a sly smile. Cindy's cup of happiness was overflowing, so she didn't give it a second thought. She waved and Freedom tossed his head high and whinnied joyfully as they cantered out of sight, victory in their hands!!

After the rodeo had given out the ribbons, Cindy went out to her mom at the horse trailer to bring Freedom a last drink of water. “Oh no need, that girl who took second place already brought him some water.” “Oh, that's weird,” said Cindy “ whatever, can I please ride Freedom home?” “Ok, just

don't dilly dally," said her mom. With that, Cindy hopped onto Freedom and galloped out into the starlit night.

The plains were beautiful at night, the stars were starting to peek out like someone poking holes in the sky. The moon shone brightly, lighting their path. Crickets chirped quietly in the grasses, and birds were piping up the last of their lovely songs. The air was sweet and fresh, the grass padded softly under Freedom's hooves. Buttercups were scattered through the grasses like droplets of sunshine left from the day, and the last of the pink was fading from the sky.

Cindy reached back and pulled out her elastic and lucky bead from her long braid. She let the wind ruffle and untwist her hair as she tucked her lucky bead into her pocket. Cindy clicked her tongue, urging Freedom forward. He quickened his pace to a gallop, Cindy noticed he wasn't as fast as usual. "Probably tired from the rodeo," she thought as they flew across the quiet plains toward home.

Cindy was in her cozy bed, her eyelids were drooping. Before she knew it she had slipped into a deep sleep, but darkness did not close around her. Instead she saw a face. It was her grandpa's, his bristly beard and deep blue eyes so much like her own. He was riding Moonshine. "Grandpa!" she heard herself shout. "Cindy, now I can't stay long, but I have come to warn you. Freedom needs you, go to him" he said turning and galloping into a bright light. "Go to him," the words echoed in the wind.

Cindy awoke with a start, the words still playing in her head. Her dog Bruno was barking and scratching at her bedroom door. Cindy needed no more encouragement. Out she flew down the stairs and out the back door. Bruno was ahead of her, his big floppy ears flapping up and down with each stride, after making sure she had no treats in her hands, or pockets of course. He got to the barn way ahead of her. He barked twice through the barn entrance then gazed back urgently at her with his adorable brown puppy eyes.

Cindy practically flew through the barn door and gasped at the sight. There lay Freedom on his side, groaning and grinding his teeth. He lifted his beautiful head slightly at the sound of her and nickered softly, then it thumped back down.

“Bruno, go tell mom!” she said in a hoarse painful voice without taking her eyes off Freedom. Bruno, knowing exactly what this meant, ran to the house. He was not sure what was wrong except the big, fast, smelly animal in the barn smelled even weirder than usual, and Cindy wasn’t happy!

For three painful days Freedom was on the ground groaning in pain. The vet was there every day and informed them that if Cindy had been an hour later Freedom would have died! The vet also informed them that Freedom had likely been poisoned, and Cindy was pretty sure she knew who had done it.

She wouldn't do anything or talk to anyone, not even Nicholas. She spent most of her time in her room or out in the barn where her beautiful friend who had carried her to victory countless times, was slowly dying.

Finally the vet said that it would turn one way or another that night. Cindy went pale and her lips quivered, shakily she went up to her room without a word, Bruno sadly trotting up behind her.

Very early the next morning Cindy walked out to the barn, fear and grief gripped tightly at her heart. The moon was still up, its silvery moonshine fell across her pale face. She could almost feel her grandpa walking with her as she clutched her lucky bead to her heart. When she opened the barn door tears spilled down her face at the sight. There was Freedom standing in the middle of the barn floor his head held high. In her heart she heard her grandpa's voice say, "Cindy, go to him."

She ran to Freedom sliding easily onto his back. Freedom reared up thrashing the air with his deadly hooves. Cindy clung to his back, tears of joy streaming down her face. Death's jaws had gripped at Freedom's life again, but nothing could tear them apart! Not now, not ever!!

THE END