

## **The Yellow Poster**

There are things that happen to us that change the direction of our lives. Sometimes it's a minor tweak and other times it's a full course correction. It could be a small event. A huge event. Or a traumatic event. It could have happened as a child or an adult. It's different for everyone. For me, it was a chain of small events.

Thanks to my older brothers, the first incident sent me on a quest to become a jockey. It happened a month after my eighth birthday during the 1958 World Series.

“Why do we have to watch baseball?” I glared at my brothers. “I want to watch *Heidi*”

“It's not just baseball, it's the World Series you little twerp,” Frankie said. “Besides, we get to watch whatever we want. We're older.”

Kenny, the younger brother, threw back his head, “Yodel-Ay-Ee-Oooo.” Then he wailed, “Grandfather. Grandfather. Boo-hoo.”

My eyes burned, but I wouldn't let myself cry. If I did, Frankie would torment me.

“Look Katie, it isn't just the World Series. It's the seventh and deciding game. After being down three games to the Milwaukee Braves, the Yankees have made a miraculous comeback. This is history in the making,” Frankie said, then swung his arms like he was hitting a ball. “Home run!”

My father joined the boys in front of the 12-inch black and white television, then reached over and patted my head. “Why don't you help your mother in the kitchen? She's making chocolate oatmeal cookies.”

“Fine!” I stormed to the kitchen. The aroma of chocolate blended with warm oatmeal soothed me. “Why can’t I ever watch what I want?”

Mom smiled and handed me a beater dripping with cookie batter. “Not today. This is a big game.”

After a few licks, I conceded. “I suppose.”

“Verna says there is a great kids movie on television Sunday afternoon about a girl and a horse. Baseball will be over and we can reserve the time slot for that show. And why don’t we invite Betty to join you?” Verna lived two houses away. Betty was her daughter.

“That’s a good idea. I love horses.” Satisfied with the plan, I finished licking the beater and put it into the sink.

Meanwhile, the guys watched the Yankees beat the Braves six to two. We celebrated the Yankee victory with cookies and milk.

When Sunday arrived, my brothers threw a little fit, but my mother took possession of the television and tuned into NBC for the movie.

“We hate Katie’s movies. Is this going to be another *boohoo* show?” Frankie asked.

Mom shook her finger at the boys and said, “Today is Katie’s day. Don’t spoil it for her.”

Betty arrived carrying a huge brown bag of freshly popped corn. The aroma of melted butter made my stomach growl. Her dad owned a dairy farm, so she had also brought four bottles of fresh chocolate milk.

Mom set out the last of the chocolate oatmeal cookies on the coffee table, then joined my brothers on the couch. “Don’t overeat and make yourselves sick,” she warned.

Betty and I sat Indian style on the floor as close as we could get to the small television.

My brothers perched on the couch and played Slap Jack, slapping as loud as they could whenever a jack appeared. Then they'd turn their heads to catch our reaction. They'd do anything to annoy us girls.

"Quiet," Betty pleaded. "I want to be able to hear the movie."

"Me too. I love horse movies," I said, even though this was a first for me.

"I love horse movies," Kenny mimicked, then snorted and whinnied.

When the music started, the room quieted.

"*National Velvet!*" Kenny stood on the couch. "Is this a sissy movie?"

"Be quiet and watch or leave the room," Mom said.

He made a face as he flopped back down.

Nobody moved during the entire show. The only sound, other than the movie, was us eating popcorn.

When it ended, my head swirled. I could barely contain my excitement. "I want a horse. I want to be a jockey just like Velvet."

"Velvet isn't a real person. She's a character in a book who is being played by a movie star," Frankie said, trying his best to ruin my mood.

"I know that." But I'd seen her riding the horse. She was amazing. I wanted to be just like her. Look like her. Win the Grand National. Dream big dreams like her.

"Her real name is Elizabeth Taylor. She's a wonderful actress," Mom said. Then added, "And she's beautiful."

For months after watching *National Velvet*, I pretended to be a jockey—ride a horse. I'd put on an old baseball cap, tie a rope onto my father's saw horse and climb aboard. I imagined

myself riding in the Grand National. I'd hunker down and whisper to the hobby horse head, "You can do it Pie, you can do it...jump!"

I could almost feel the wind blowing through my curly red hair. Oh, how I wished it were straight, dark and long. I almost scrubbed my face raw trying to remove my freckles. But I still looked like Little Orphan Annie.

I drove my family crazy with my dream to become a jockey like Elizabeth Taylor.

The next life-changing incident occurred a few months later. I'd have to categorize this one as traumatic. At least it felt like it at the time.

I overheard my mother talking to our neighbor, Verna. "Saturday at two o'clock. You'll pick them up at one. Sounds great."

I stood waiting, wondering why my mother was smiling.

"Betty has invited you and your brothers to go to the movies. A new Disney movie is out, *Old Yeller*. It's playing at the York Theater."

"What's the movie about?"

Mom shrugged. "Verna says it's a kid's movie about a dog."

On Saturday, we piled into Verna's station wagon and rode to the next town.

When we arrive at the York Theater, a long line stretched along the sidewalk to the box office and continued into the building toward the concession area. Big posters of upcoming movies lined the hallway. As we slowly nudged along enjoying the smell of popcorn and hot dogs, the corridor buzzed with whispered conversations. Our group remained silent.

Then I spotted her name. I poked Betty's arm. "Look. Elizabeth Taylor."

As we got closer, I felt heat climb up my neck until my cheeks burned. I wanted to look away, but I couldn't take my eyes off the bright yellow poster. My idol was in her underwear—a scandalous slip. My idol wasn't that girl on the horse anymore. According to the poster, she was Maggie the cat. She didn't look like a cat or a Maggie. She looked like Francine, the boy-crazy girl who lived next door to Betty.

I tried not to look at her. Instead, I read all the words and names. *The Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* starring Elizabeth Taylor, Paul Newman, Burl Ives, Jack Carson, Judith Anderson—based on the play “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof” by Tennessee Williams.

“What kind of a name is Tennessee Williams?” I blurted, not wanting to admit my disappointment at seeing my idol scantily dressed. My dream to be like her melted away the closer we got. I liked her better in the pink and gold jockey outfit.

Verna reached down, winked, and took my hand. “Come on. Let's go watch this movie about a dog.”

My excitement over the dog movie had vanished, but I pretended to be thrilled. “Let's go. I can't wait.”

Verna bought popcorn and a pink lemonade for all of us. We found seats in the balcony.

The movie was a roller coaster ride. I laughed. I cried. When it was over, I wanted to see it again, but Verna assured me that wasn't possible.

“But I might have missed an important part,” I argued. The truth was, I didn't want to walk by that poster again.

“It's not that. We'd have to buy another set of tickets.”

I finally understood. “That's a lot of money for all of us.”

“Yes. And I told your mother I'd have you home by five.”

I felt glued to the seat. That poster.

“Come on Katie,” Frankie said. “Maybe you can get a dog.”

I stuck my tongue out at him as I stood.

He looked at Verna and said, “She wanted a horse after seeing *National Velvet*. I figured she might want a dog after seeing this movie.”

“Or a puppy,” Kenny added his two cents.

“Quit it! I don’t want anything.” I pushed my way to the aisle and stomped down the stairs amid the crowd, many of them crying or blowing their noses. I was beyond crying. My dream of becoming a jockey had been dashed with a yellow poster.

My disillusionment with Elizabeth Taylor, her portrayal of Velvet and then being photographed in unmentionables, haunted me through elementary and junior high school. My ambition to join the world of professional horse racing became a family joke. I laughed too, but not at first.

I buried myself in books. Or I watched movies when I could commandeer the television set. My fascination with characters, plot, and settings grew. How was it that I immersed myself so deeply? I’d become that person, in that place, doing those things. Was it something about me? Was I weak? Or easily duped? Did I have a bad gene? Or was it something else? Did the author drag me in?

My final course correction occurred in high school. Mr. Catalini, my freshman English teacher, finally shed light on my susceptibility to getting lost in a book or a movie. It was then that I began to realize I wasn’t a freak afterall.

On the first day of class, he leaned back on his desk at the front of the room and waited for everyone to get seated. “Welcome back. Did everyone have a good summer?”

Most of the students responded with a ‘yes.’

“Good. Because now it’s time for you to get back to work.”

The room remained quiet.

He waved a mimeographed sheet at us. “Here’s a syllabus. As you can see, your first assignment is to read John Steinbeck’s book, *The Red Pony*, and write a five-hundred-word essay explaining the theme.”

A groan passed through the class like a wave at a baseball game.

He pointed to a stack of thin books sitting on a table next to the door. “Take a copy on your way out. Be sure to sign the sheet and fill in the book number stamped inside the cover.”

He walked from row to row counting out sheets of paper. “Take one and pass the rest back. Raise your hand if you don’t get one.”

A hand flew up in the back.

“Do you need a syllabus or do you have a question?”

“A question.”

Mr. Catalini lifted his eyebrows. “Go ahead. Ask.”

“What’s a theme,” the student asked.

“Good question. That’s exactly what we are going to discover in this class.”

Mr. Catalini spent the next 45 minutes introducing us to *theme*. It sounded like the bait I eagerly swallowed piece by piece when watching movies or reading a good book. My mind wandered back to *National Velvet* and my dream to become a jockey.

“Katie, the bell rang. It’s time for our next class,” a girlfriend said. “Come on let’s get our book and head to math class.”

I picked up my copy and opened the cover to get the stamped number. “Fourteen,” I said as I wrote it on the sign-out sheet. Then I looked at my friend. “Another horse tale.”

She scowled. “What do you mean?”

“Never mind. It’s a long story.” I stuffed the thin book into my bookbag.

The day flew by and I forgot about the book until six-thirty when I went to my room after dinner to do my homework. I had an assignment in every subject.

I dumped out the book bag onto my bed. The slim hardcovered novella rested on top. I picked it up and lifted it to my nose and sniffed. “Nice. Earthy.”

A picture of a reddish-brown horse in a pasture decorated the front cover. The horse’s color matched my auburn hair. I fingered the green frame that enclosed the print. A matching frame outlined the book’s outer edges. Then I opened to the first page and began reading.

A creak from my door startled me. “Katie. It’s after ten. What are you doing up so late?”

I stared at my mother. “Reading. I lost track of time.”

“Lights out,” Mom said as she closed my door.

I’d work on my other homework on the bus or in study hall. I’d have plenty of time. I slid under the covers with my penlight and read the remaining four pages before I fell asleep.

My freshman year turned into a juggling act, cramming for non-English classes and losing myself in books. As the end of the year approached, I wondered what the final exam in Mr. Catalini’s class would entail. I’d developed an insatiable appetite for literature and composition. I felt every beat—every breath in each story I read.

The room quieted as Mr. Catalini entered with his arms loaded. After placing the stack of papers on his desk, he held up a stapled copy. “This, my friends, is your final exam. It’s a play.”

“We haven’t studied plays,” one of the girls remarked.

“True. But you won’t need to. Your assignment is to write a five-hundred-word essay about the author’s theme.”

That same groan heard on our first class undulated through the room.

“Who’s the author?” a boy asked.

“Tennessee Williams.”

My heart stopped. My life flashed before my eyes—walking down that corridor—that yellow movie poster. I gasped. “Elizabeth Taylor.”

The entire class looked at me.

Mr. Catalina laughed. He must have read my thoughts. “No. Not his fourteenth play.”

My heart recovered as he turned the front page toward the me. “What’s the title, Katie?”

I read it aloud. “*The Glass Menagerie*.”

After English as I was walking toward math class, I remembered the number stamped inside *The Red Pony*, Steinbeck’s novella—fourteen. Coincidence? Or an omen? Maybe neither.

I aced the final exam.

After freshman year, my path was set. And it had nothing to do with horse racing. I wanted to be a writer. No, I was going to be a writer, whatever it took. I wanted to be like Tennessee Williams. To be able make people think—feel—understand life through my words. I read most of his plays, but not when I was feeling down. Though his words rang true, his themes could be depressing.

When I finally read *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, I wondered if Elizabeth Taylor accurately portrayed the Maggie that Tennessee Williams envisioned. I refused to watch the movie or see the play, but I did read the script. For me, the written word is always better. I think it's in my DNA. Reading allows me to immerse myself, get lost in the words.

I also wondered if Tennessee Williams and Elizabeth Taylor ever met. I heard that he lived in Key West, Florida for a many years and Elizabeth visited the Burton's cottage on Angela Street during that timeframe.

I chuckled remembering I'd asked Verna '*What kind of a name is Tennessee Williams?*'

Now I knew. Tennessee Williams was name that would never be forgotten.

Thanks to that yellow poster, I found my passion.

And I'm not a jockey.