

THINK RATHER OF ZEBRA

Dealing with Aspects
of Poverty
Through Story

Stories
adapted by

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Introduction
and
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PROLOGUE

A student had studied for a long time and felt that he was finally ready to leave his teacher.

“You are not ready,” the teacher told him with a gentle smile.

“Why not?” asked the student, almost indignantly.

“You have not yet learned the meaning of story,” replied the teacher.

The student looked so disappointed that his teacher added quietly, “Stories can teach us a new way of seeing things, of thinking about them, and of responding.”

Because he could see that his student still did not understand, the wise teacher reached out to help once again. “When you hear hoofbeats, what do you think of?” he questioned in a soft voice.

“Why, a horse, certainly!” answered the student with confidence.

“That is because you have become conditioned, and in that conditioning you have fallen asleep,” the patient teacher pointed out.

“When you hear hoofbeats—think rather of zebra.”

In the eye of the student a glimmer of understanding shone. Turning to the teacher, he said, “Tell me a story.”

CHAPTER 1

Tales of Poverty and Wealth

In a tired neighborhood, in an old brick housing project, ten-year-old Carlos lives with his mama. Though outsiders might be afraid to travel in these streets, this is Carlos' neighborhood, and these are Carlos' streets (truth be told, fear is a large part of Carlos' life). On a steamy, late-summer afternoon, he sat on some steps and conversed with Pete about being rich one day. Carlos knew that Pete, an older man with a patch on one eye, could see more with his good eye than most of the rest of the neighborhood combined (except for Carlos' mama). Pete smiled at Carlos and asked, "Did I ever tell you about how Rufus Burns got himself rich?" Pete leaned back and took a breath, then off he went ...

The Remarkable Dreams of Rufus Burns

Rufus was a street peddler who lived over on First Avenue. He had a little house in front of his stable. I believe his horse Maybelle had more room in the stable than Rufus had in his house. I know that the yard in between was barely big enough for a little cherry tree. This all happened before the city government and the Sac 'n Save put street peddlers like Rufus out of business. Early in the morning, way before the sun came up, Rufus would hitch up his wagon to Maybelle and go down to the farmers' market and buy fruits and vegetables. By mid-morning, you could hear the clip-clop of Maybelle's hooves and the chanting song that Rufus would sing out about the produce on his wagon. He would sell apples and bananas and peaches and plums to the folks on their way to work, or maybe a snack, an apricot or grapes, to those already working. For the folks still at home, his song would roust them out and get them moving to the tune of "Tomaaaatoes, ohhhkra, fresh-picked collard greens." He didn't

get rich pulling his wagon and singing his song, but he survived. Some days, Mister Rufus even sold some of the ripe cherries off that little tree in his yard. I bet even your mama remembers eating some of Mister Rufus' ripe cherries.

“You know that’s right,” Carlos said, kicking at an ant on the sidewalk. “But how’d he get rich?”

Back one spring, Rufus woke up earlier than early and shook his head. It wasn’t time to get up, but he couldn’t sleep because he’d had a dream. He dreamed if he went into Houston to City Hall down on Bagby Street and stood on the front steps, he would discover an amazing thing. But time was moving, and he didn’t want to take time worrying about foolish dreams. So he got up, hitched Maybelle to the wagon, and went on over to the farmers’ market. By the time the sun was up, he was so busy greeting his neighbors with his fruit-and-vegetable chant, he didn’t think any more about that dream. Problem was, the next night he had that same dream again. And the next night.

“Same dream, huh?” Carlos was trying not to be interested.

You got that right. And after he had that same dream three nights running, well, you know what they say about dreams like that. He skipped the farmers' market altogether and got a ride into Houston. From mid-morning to late in the afternoon, Rufus stood on those City Hall steps waiting to discover something amazing. But the only thing even a little bit amazing that he discovered was how hot those steps were and how loud his stomach complained about being ignored. He finally went over and sat on a bench under the big oak trees at the library building. No one is real sure where he spent the night that night, but the next morning he was back on the City Hall steps hoping to discover something amazing. The fact that he didn't give up and come home was the only amazing thing about that day. He stayed right downtown, and the next morning, that crazy Rufus was out there on those steps again. Late in

