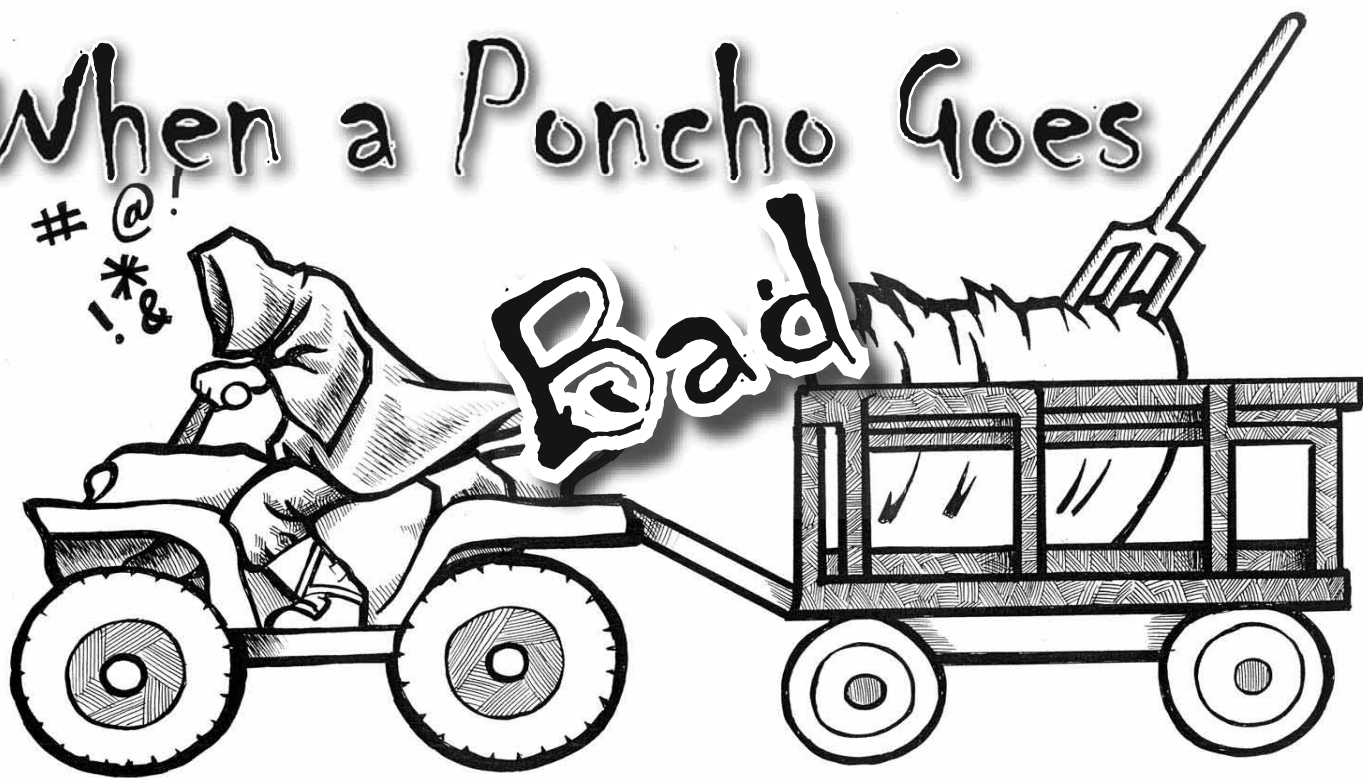


# When a Poncho Goes

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOHN NATHAN HANSEN OF UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA AT KEARNEY

by Bunny Ryan-Kennedy

Rain fell heavily on the cold Nebraska soil while it waited for the first winter snow. The thought of leaving the warmth of my home in this late fall storm left me shivering. It wasn't my choice! Unfortunately, if those four-legged critters were going to have a meal, I would be the one to serve it.

The farm and horses had been in my care since John's death in the spring. If you knew me this was a scary concept. As a California girl the only farm I was acquainted with was the "fat" farm. Horses I knew because my Dad raised Arabians, but farm management I experienced on the reactive scale of learning... like engines needing oil?!

Spring had been manageable but the fall presented a whole new set of challenges. Rainy weather like this had found John bundled up to do chores. After 37 years of marriage he knew that, like Puxatawny Phil, I hibernated during the ugly weather and bloomed with the flowers in the spring.

It was cold and wet and freezing out there - and me with nothing to wear! Sad but true.... My line of apparel consisted of town coats and one barn jacket, a light-weight pair of gloves, insulated boots from the 80s, and a stocking cap used only in the most dire weather situations. Snow was inevitable but rain was so drenching, so hair flattening, so wet... So I opened the mud room closet where hung, like chapters in a bad biographical novel, a patched history of my six kids and their outerwear, small to large coats hanging side by side - rain, wind, snow. Some we bought, some were lost and found, and some were like the immaculate conception - gifts from God. With such an assortment there had to be something wearable!

As I dug deep into the closet to find anything my size, my fingers ran over something CRISP!

Yes! It was a faded, red plastic poncho proudly displaying the logo of the Denver Broncos. I really didn't care what it advertised as long as it shed water. This one had to come to the closet through osmosis! From its appearance it was a thrift store discard -- the proverbial wall flower at a high school dance. It was in every sense of the word, a fashion reject.

It appeared to be a dual-purpose poncho built to fit any size, and, when opened flat, could serve as a picnic tablecloth.... When this rectangular piece of plastic was folded, a hood sprouted from its center. Snaps down the sides formed just a suggestion of armholes. Suggestion because among the remaining holes left by the ripped out snaps were a few working models, just enough to grasp each side. The hood was intact but its drawstring had long disappeared. To the poncho's front where the hood ended, the throat began and crisply splintered down to about the breastbone. I needed closure so I found a hair clip to "secure" the front and at least keep my chest dry. I was desperate but now I was ready.

Here at the threshold of my newly widowed life I stood as a fashion emergency -- a vision in my hot pink, fur-lined moon boots, fashion corduroy jeans, a red poncho that was crisper than most tortilla chips, and a hood facsimile. Certainly there would be no second marriage for me! As I opened the back door, the wind grabbed the storm door and sucked me out onto the patio along with my three dogs. Like Mighty Mouse I was there to save the day. Chore time!

Above the wind and through the rain I could hear the grumpy greetings from my hungry horses. As I came into view, their tails raised over their backs like an elephant lifting its trunk. I finished off the chores in the small barn and slogged to the new. Snow would have been nicer at 20 degrees than this 38 degree rain.

I removed the poncho in the main barn so I could be about my work. It fell in a freefall, landing at attention on the floor. Believe me this poncho had more bone density than most women over 70. Hearing the dogs whine outside the closed barn door, I cracked it open and in they scampered - the wind following in pursuit. With a huge gust it slowly lifted the poncho dragging its hem on the floor and picking up speed as it flew the 60 feet to the end of the alley. The billeted horses cowered, nostrils flaring, sides heaving, feet stomping! Then as quickly as it started, it was over. The poncho fell - its bid for freedom, over! Shaking off what I had just witnessed, I untangled the dogs from my legs and rescued my red co-dependent from its semi-permanent entanglement with the arena gate. I fastened the few remaining snaps and the hair clip to keep the poncho under control and headed out.

As I seemingly floated to the hay storage barn, the outside horses came alive with wide-eyed expectation and tails flagging - much the same way they greeted our wild turkey invasion last spring. By now the poncho was taking its toll. Even though the length of the split down the front of the neck was clasped, there were raw edges at my jaw line that caressed my jugular, nicking my neck in cadence to each step. The pain grabbed my attention and forced me to walk tall. Sometimes I find it hard to rise to the occasion!

The cold, crisp rain hammered my waiting four-wheeler and its utility wagon. Having mastered the use of hay hooks in the spring, I slung a bale of alfalfa into the wagon and buried the pitchfork deep into the bale. The pasture awaited!

The soaking wet seat of the quad hardly welcomed me. I found a rag and tried to dry it but the more I wiped, the wetter it got.



The choices were few so I straddled the seat, lowering my hips to their watery surprise. It took my breath away as those raindrops spread from my crotch to my knees -- the corduroy ribs serving as wicks for the moisture. Since I carry more weight than I should, the water coverage was much greater than on an average person and therefore I carried a greater slosh factor. My breath came like smoke signals as the wet corduroy steamed along my thighs. puff Help! puff Help! puff Help! Now I was not only cold, wet and in pain but sloshed. I wanted to get sloshed!

Dropping the quad into first, I made my way to the pasture knowing those mares would be deep in the woods at the north end of the place. I hated the rain, and opening each pasture gate brought the realization that I would have to once again mount that moisture-laden seat. Like Thomas of the train fame, I drove across the pasture saying, I think I can, I think I can -- that is, find the herd before I bled to death. Each sideways glance brought a grimace of fresh nicks on my neck. I'm not cut out for this!

But the poncho wasn't through with me yet. Just a few weeks before, I had lost a pitchfork out of the wagon so I was particularly careful not to lose it over the pasture terrain. I just needed to keep checking to see if it was there. But as I turned my head around to check, the stiffened hood kept its forward "non-motion" -- my head was turning like a paddle inside an ice cream churn. My face rotated to a full view of the rear merchandise tags anonymously and permanently attached to the inside back neck of the hood with its size declaring, FITS MOST! Turning left, turning right, it was always the same -- FITS MOST! Slapping the hood with my hands did nothing but assuage my frustration. This surely was a chapter from a Stephen King novel!

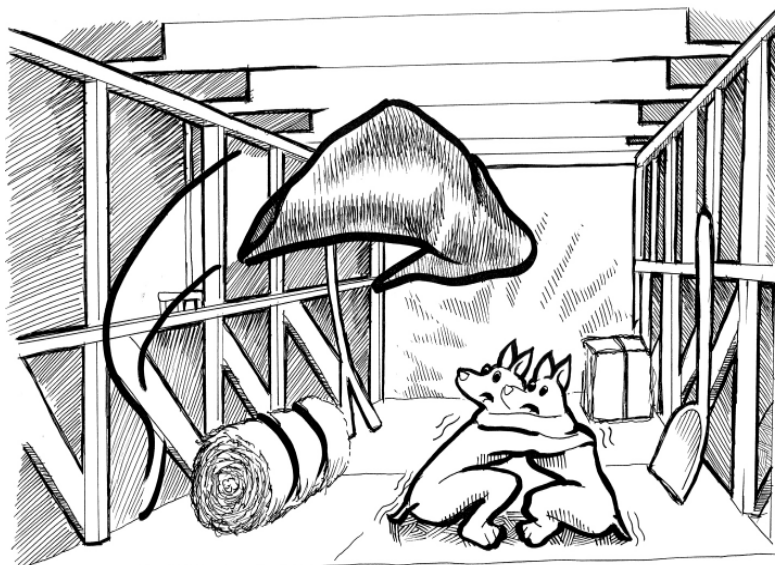
By now I had burned any bridge I had with my dogs. I had shouted enough four-letter words that they had chosen the path of least resistance -- the one leading to their doggie door into the house. These dogs carry a full translation of all naughty words and act accordingly. Traitors!

With tears streaming and nose running I made my caped way to those distant mares.

Twice I stopped, dismounted, performed a complete robotic turn, checked for the pitchfork, recommitted myself to the wet seat and drove on. Did the pitchfork make it? Did I care? People, why do we do this? Why? The horses don't care! I was utterly disgusted as the mares angrily circled the wagon for their handout. My total "cheek" compliment stung with the cold left by splattering rain drops. My poncho failed me miserably and had certainly changed my opinion of the Denver Broncos -- which might require long-term therapy. Long abandoned by my dogs I made my way back to the warmth of my home.

It's hard to believe that there are some people of little faith who think I don't learn from my mistakes. Well there is a mail order, outdoor gear company that made payroll the next week because of my newly purchased storm wardrobe! And what about the poncho? I'm somewhat sad to say it mysteriously disappeared while hanging by its hood from a fence post. I told the investigating officer I just hung it there to dry. Who turned it loose? Who did the deed? The horses aren't talking, nor the dogs, nor am I.

But I can tell you that on a crisp autumn day we did have services for old "red" and somewhere east of Nebraska there are shards of plastic blowing in the wind -- his fifteen minutes fame just a memory..... And I think John had a good day in heaven, laughing and loving me and thinking, "She'll learn!"



### About Bunny ...

From the time I uttered my first word it was inevitable that I become a wordsmith. Dialogue always came naturally to me but the official "license" to use the written word took me years to earn. Yes, I was a college dropout! Then, as my six kids were having their college experience, my pride goaded me into completing my degree in Journalism/Public Relations. I finally graduated from the University of Nebraska at Kearney, Magna Cum Laude, as a twenty-fifth year senior. At graduation some kid asked me if I was going on to get a Masters. My gosh at my age I didn't have 25 more years to give it!

This is my first attempt to share my perverse writing style with the general public. The ideas spring from my overwhelming experiences of raising a blended family of six. Having moved from California to Nebraska I began writing the proverbial Christmas letter to my friends so they too could understand my rural existence --- an environment well above my comfort level. My friends in turn shared the epistles with others. These letters contained not the awards or notable achievements or anything in the least braggadocios. They were written around the mistakes, the funny happenings, faux pas of our everyday life. And my darling husband bore the brunt of my twisted sense of humor.

My horse background has served me well. John was from Wyoming and knew the ranch side of horses and I was from California where my dad raised and showed Arabians so I knew the arena side. After our marriage we raised Appaloosas and then in 1989 we bought our first POA. That has been our pony of choice ever since! Our farm name is the Pony Palace and seems to be highly regarded in the equine circles.

In March 2005 I lost John after a 20-year battle against heart disease. Our 37 year marriage produced exceptional children and 16 beautiful and bright grandchildren. It also produced enough writing "fodder" to last me a lifetime. So now, in between farm chores, I write the words with humor that John loved. I hope you love them too.

*Bunny Ryan-Kennedy*

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