

Sweet Country Air

Eduardo rummaged around in his backpack, searching for his cell phone. He was tired of Aunt Letty rambling on and on about her chickens, goats, horses, and cows. Worse, he was dreading having to spend spring break at Aunt Letty's ranch.

Although he had protested, Eduardo's parents decided that spending time at the ranch would be a great experience for him. Phrases such as "watching too much TV," and "too much texting" were swirling around in his head. His parents grew up on a ranch and believed that responsibility, hard work, and respect for the land were valuable lessons. "Lessons you need to learn, son," they said.

"So, have you ever ridden a horse?" Aunt Letty asked, trying to turn his attention away from his phone.

"Hmmm, no. But I've seen horses on TV," he answered.

"Well, we've got a nice mellow horse I think you'll like. Hercules—sounds like a beast, but he's basically a gentle giant—big, but kindhearted. The goats and chickens have names, too, but don't worry, you won't have to remember their names. If you show up at the gate with feed, they're happy!" she said smiling.

Eduardo glanced at his aunt, resentful that he was expected to work. Vacations were meant for sleeping late, playing video games, and maybe skateboarding. He tried to text a friend.

"Phones don't work well out here. With all the hills and valleys, it's hard to get a connection."

Eduardo grimaced, but Aunt Letty was right—there was no cell reception.

The next few days were busy. The crow of the roosters woke them up, and they had breakfast before dawn. Then they went out to the barn to get the feed while the animals waited to be fed. The afternoons were filled with hauling hay, cleanup, and caring for the animals. The animals depended on Aunt Letty, but they also provided her with affection and necessities such as eggs, milk, and cheese.

At dusk, when the ranch was finally quiet, Aunt Letty stretched her arms out and inhaled, “Just take a deep breath of that sweet country air!” Eduardo, exhausted from his chores, was unable to appreciate his work.

On the third day, without warning, Aunt Letty announced, “It’s time to meet Hercules.” She marched into the stables with conviction, and Aunt Letty was right again. Hercules was remarkable! His head loomed over the stall door.

“You feed him,” Eduardo said nervously. “I’ll watch.

Aunt Letty didn’t argue or try to force Eduardo into feeding Hercules. Instead, she stood quietly as Hercules lowered his enormous head, and she whispered to him. She stroked Hercules on his long, silky muzzle and offered him an apple.

Without speaking, Aunt Letty held her hand open for Eduardo to take. Reluctantly, he let her guide his hand toward Hercules and allowed the magnificent creature to sniff his palm. Softly, Hercules nuzzled him.

“It feels like velvet!” Eduardo beamed. An hour later, Eduardo was scratching Hercules on his neck and offering him carrots.

That night, as they headed toward the house, Eduardo was inspired. His arms spread wide, he inhaled and said, “Take a breath of that sweet country air!”

Questions

1. At the beginning of the story, how does Eduardo feel about his visit to the ranch?
2. Why do Eduardo's parents send him to the ranch?
3. What do the details about Aunt Letty and Hercules reveal about Letty's character?
4. Explain what Eduardo learns from the animals and his Aunt Letty. How does his visit to the ranch change his character?

Vocabulary List

Each of the vocabulary words below are used in the reading passage. As you read the passage, pay attention to context clues that suggest the word's meaning.

1. rummaged
2. rambling
3. dreading
4. swirling
5. mellow
6. hauling
7. inhaled
8. conviction
9. enormous
10. muzzle

Context Clues

Using context clues from the sentences in the passage, underline the correct meaning of the word in boldface.

1) "Eduardo **rummaged** around in his backpack, searching for his cell phone."

- a. tossed or threw b. curled up or cuddled c. jumped or danced d. hunted or dug

2) "He was tired of Aunt Letty **rambling** on and on about her chickens, goats, horses, and cows."

- a. working endlessly b. strolling c. talking aimlessly; chattering d. painting; drawing

3) "Worse, he was **dreading** having to spend spring break at Aunt Letty's ranch."

- a. fearing; anticipating the worse b. looking forward to c. planning on d. running away from

4) "Phrases such as 'watching too much TV,' and 'too much texting' were **swirling** around in his head."

- a. lying b. twisting or rolling c. messing; clowning d. pushing

5) "Well, we've got a nice **mellow** horse I think you'll like."

- a. light golden brown b. young male c. small; petite d. gentle; calm

6) "The afternoons were filled with **hauling** hay"

- a. raking b. putting into a pile; stacking c. transporting; carrying d. selling

7) "Aunt Letty stretched her arms out and **inhaled**"

- a. breathed in b. relaxed; let go c. screamed or yelled d. hugged fondly

8) "She marched into the stables with conviction"

- a. criminal intent b. determination or confidence c. warm food d. anger; dismay

9) "Hercules lowered his enormous head"

- a. ugly; repulsive b. horse-like c. huge; very large d. sweet and pleasant

10) "She stroked Hercules on his long, silky muzzle and offered him an apple"

- a. front of an animal's head; nose b. ears c. mane d. back; withers