Crossing Spider Creek
by Dan O'Brien

Read the following story and answer the discussion questions.

Here is a seriously injured man on a frightened horse. They are high in the Rocky Mountains at the junction of the Roosevelt Trail and Spider Creek. Tom has tried to coax the horse into the freezing water twice before. Both times the horse started to cross then lost its nerve, swung around violently, and lunged back up the bank. The pivot and surge of power had been nearly too much for Tom. Both times he almost lost his grip on the saddlehorn and fell into the boulders of the creek bank. Both times, when it seemed his hold would fail, he had thought of his wife, Carol. He will try the crossing once more. It will take all the strength he has left.

This is not the Old West. It is 1987, autumn, a nice day near the beginning of elk season. Two days ago Tom had led the horse, his camp packed in panniers hung over the saddle, up this same trail. He had some trouble getting the horse to cross the creek but it hadn't been bad. This was a colt, Carol's colt and well broke to lead. It had come across without much fuss. But that was before the nice weather had swelled Spider Creek with runoff, and of course the colt had not had the smell of blood in his nostrils.

Tom's injury is a compound fracture of the right femur. He has wrapped it tightly with an extra cotton shirt but he cannot stop the bleeding. The blood covers the right shoulder of the horse, the rifle scabbard, and the saddle from the seat to the stirrup. Tom knows that it is the loss of blood that is making him so weak. He wonders if that is why his thoughts keep wandering from what he is trying to do here, with the horse, to Carol. She has never understood his desire to be alone. From time to time, over the years, she has complained that he cares less for her than for solitude. He has always known that is not true. But still it seems vaguely funny to him that now she is all he wants to think about. He wishes she could know that, hopes he will have a chance to tell her.

Perhaps it is being on this particular horse, he thinks, the one Carol likes better than any of the others. Maybe Carol has spent enough time with this horse to have become part of it.

The horse moves nervously under him as he reins it around to face the water again. Tom wishes there were a way to ease the animal through this. But there is not, and there is clearly little time. There is just this one last chance.

They begin to move slowly down the bank again. It will be all or nothing. If the horse makes it across Spider Creek they will simply ride down the trail, be at a campground in twenty minutes. There are other hunters there. They will get him to a hospital. If the horse refuses and spins in fear, Tom will fall. The horse will clamber up the bank and stand aloof, quaking with terror and forever out of reach. Tom sees himself bleeding to death, alone, by the cascading icy water.

As the horse stretches out its nose to sniff at the water, Tom thinks that there might be time, if he falls, to grab at the rifle and drag it from the scabbard as he goes down. He clucks to the horse and it moves forward. Though he would hate to, it might be possible to shoot the horse from where he would fall. With luck he would have the strength to crawl to it and hold its warm head for a few moments before they died. I would be best for Carol if they were found like that.

Here is a seriously injured man on a frightened horse. They are standing at the edge of Spider Creek, the horse's trembling front feet in the water and the man's spurs held an inch from the horse's flanks.
Please answer the following questions. Remember to restate the question and answer in complete sentences.

1. Do you believe Tom made it back to the campground? Why or why not? Support your answer with details from the story.

2. From what point of view is this story told?

3. What internal conflict is Tom facing? What external conflict is Tom facing?

4. Why do you think the author decided to leave the story open-ended? What does it add to the mood of the story?

5. Write an ending for this story in one or two paragraphs. Please make the ending believable to this particular story, for example, do not write an ending where Tom is saved by a superhero, or some other fantastical means.