

# Alice the Camel

*This is the original Road's End story, the first one that I wrote, and much like Alice herself, is still one of my favourites!*

Once upon a time, at a farm at the end of a road, there lived a pony named Alice. Alice was a very beautiful pony, and she knew it! She had a shining bay coat, and a pretty face, and most beautiful of all, a thick black mane and forelock that hung down over her eyes. She liked to toss her mane flirtatiously at all of the boys, and especially whenever her friend Vanessa was nearby, as Vanessa had a shorter mane and foolishly stubby forelock.



One day Alice was in the barn being tacked up for a trail ride when a girl walked past her and fished her hand into a red jar on the grain bin. Alice knew exactly what was in that red jar, and she tossed her pretty head and pricked up her ears.

Look at me, she thought. I'm so beautiful. I deserve a peppermint.

The girl looked at Alice, but began to walk right past her. Alice quickly stamped a foreleg to get the girl's attention. She turned her head as far as she could on the crossties and tried to look as beautiful as possible. It wasn't too hard for a pony as pretty as Alice, and sure enough, the girl stopped in her tracks. Unable to resist Alice's charms, she unwrapped a peppermint and held it out to Alice, who quickly lipped it up and crunched happily. Alice's rider walked around from behind the mare, where she had been brushing out Alice's thick black and (Alice thought) rather luxuriant tail. All of the knots had been combed out and Alice flicked her tail prettily.

"Alice is so beautiful," said the girl with the peppermints. "I think she's the most beautiful pony on the whole farm."

Alice was very pleased to hear this, because there were sixty-eight other horses and ponies on the farm, so to be the most beautiful of all was no small accomplishment. (Although, Alice thought rather condescendingly, she didn't have all that much competition. Some of the ponies here were pretty ugly.)

Alice's rider patted the mare and laughed. "She is a pretty girl, but Alice isn't a pony, she's a camel!"

Alice pricked her ears in surprise and the other girl looked confused. "A camel?"

"Sure," Alice's rider said. "Haven't you ever heard the song about Alice the Camel?"

There's a song about me? Alice thought. Wow! I bet none of the other ponies here have songs written about them!

As her rider picked her feet, Alice's thoughts wandered. I wonder what my song sounds like, she mused. I wish someone would sing it for me. I bet it mentions how beautiful I am. Perhaps it has a refrain about my beautiful flowing mane.

A voice broke through Alice's reverie and she felt a hand slap gently on her rump.

"Alice! Pick up your foot!"

Oops, Alice thought as she lifted her hoof quickly into the air.

"Sometimes you find it hard to concentrate, huh camel?" her rider teased.

It's because the world around me is so interesting, Alice thought defensively. There are so many things to look at and think about. Right now, Alice was wondering what exactly it means to be a camel. It's probably a very beautiful and exclusive type of pony, Alice thought happily.

That afternoon, Alice had her head under the electric fence munching grass, because as Alice knew, the grass is always greener on the other side. Manny walked up to her and nipped at her rump. Alice quickly swerved out of the way and pinned her ears at Manny.

"Out of the way, little pony," Manny said. Alice was one of his friends, but he was not always as polite to her as she felt he ought to be.

"I'm not a pony," Alice snapped. "I'm a camel."

Manny tilted his head, dumbfounded. "What's a camel?"

Alice shook her mane impatiently and decided she needed a more intelligent audience for this conversation. The biggest problem, of course, was that she didn't actually know exactly what a camel was. She didn't want Manny to know that though, so she quickly trotted off, deciding to find someone who might be able to answer that question.

Down by the pond, Alice saw Katama and Cassidy. She trotted over to them, flicking her feet out in front of her quite daintily.

Katama flattened her ears at Alice's approach and hid behind Cassidy as Alice skidded to an impressive halt in front of them.

"I have a question," she said, trying not to sound too demanding.

"Why are you picking on us?" Cassidy grumbled.

"Because you're old," Alice explained. "You know stuff."

Cassidy grunted and went back to munching grass, but Katama was a kind old mare and although she wouldn't come out from behind Cassidy, she seemed prepared to listen.

"What do you want to know?"

"What's a camel?"

"A camel?" Katama thought for a while. "I do believe I've heard of camels. It was a long time ago, when I was young and fit. I used to be a dressage horse, you know. I went to a lot of shows, some quite prestigious ones."

Alice rolled her eyes, bored already. If Katama decided to remember everything that had ever happened to her, Alice would be stuck there for days. Alice had been to a show once, when she was young, but it hadn't been all that memorable. The judge had failed to appreciate Alice's beauty and charm, and had only placed her third. As a result, Alice had a fairly low opinion of shows. She wandered away as Katama rambled on about her glory days. I could do dressage, if I wanted to, Alice thought to herself. But who would want to go round and round in pointless circles? Boring! Besides, she figured, I bet camels don't do dressage.

Alice walked across the pasture, deciding that perhaps asking an old horse wasn't quite the right tack. Who else might know? Perhaps I should ask someone really smart.

Alice cast a discerning eye across the herd. X-Caliber has an opinion about everything, she figured. And he's never shy to speak up. Perhaps he'll know. She cantered gracefully over to where Caliber was grazing side by side with his friend Wanda.

"Hey Caliber, guess what? I'm a camel. Know what that is?"

Caliber snorted disdainfully. "Something stupid, clearly, if you're one," he said as he walked away, aiming a kick at Alice on his way past. She dodged him and sighed, still no closer to figuring it out.

Wanda lifted her large head and gazed at Alice. "Don't listen to him," she said slowly. "Caliber is always like that. So...what is a camel?"

"I don't know," Alice admitted. "I just know that I am one. I suspect," she added with a toss of her pretty head. "That it has something to do with my beautiful flowing mane."

"In that case," Wanda said thoughtfully. "You should ask Quint. She might be one too."

Alice wasn't sure about that – she was fairly certain that she was the only camel in the entire herd. But it can't hurt to ask, she decided.

"Hey Alice," Wanda called as Alice started to leave. Alice swung her head back to look over her shoulder.

"Yeah?"

“I’ve heard people say that I’m a hippo. Can you find out what that is too?”

“Sure,” Alice said, with no intention of actually doing so. Let Wanda do her own detective work, she thought to herself. She’s so fat, she could stand to do some running around.

Alice approached Quint slowly, slightly intimidated by her brother Nick, because he had once told Alice that she was a silly little filly who didn’t know her hoof from her head. Alice wasn’t in the mood to be insulted again, but Quint and Nick were practically inseparable, so she had no choice. She sidled up near Quint and asked in a soft whisper.

“Quint. Are you a camel too?”

Quint kept on munching grass. Perhaps she didn’t hear me, Alice thought. She asked again.

“Quint! Are you a camel?”

This time Quint flicked an ear towards Alice and paused in her munching.

“Did you hear something?” she asked Nick.

“No,” he muttered grumpily.

“I thought I heard something,” Quint said.

Alice repeated her question, louder this time. Quint threw up her head, her long blonde mane flying dramatically.

“I did hear something! Maybe it was a fairy.”

“How many times do I have to tell you? There’s no such thing as fairies,” Nick grumbled.

“Then how did I just hear one?” Quint asked. “Duh! It knows my name, and I think it has a camera. Perhaps it wants to take a picture of me!” And she shook her mane and tossed her head again, looking around for the fairy.

Nick sighed. “It’s not a fairy and it doesn’t want to take your picture. Look behind you, it’s that silly filly again.”

Quint turned to look at Alice. “Hello,” she said. “Be careful. There’s a fairy nearby. Don’t step on it! Fairies are very small you know.”

“Uh, okay.” Alice said. “Quint, are you a camel?”

“A what?”

“A camel.”

Quint blinked. "What's that?"

Alice sighed. This was going nowhere. "Never mind." She turned to leave.

"If you see a fairy," Quint called. "Be sure to remind it to shoot my picture from the right. It's my best side."

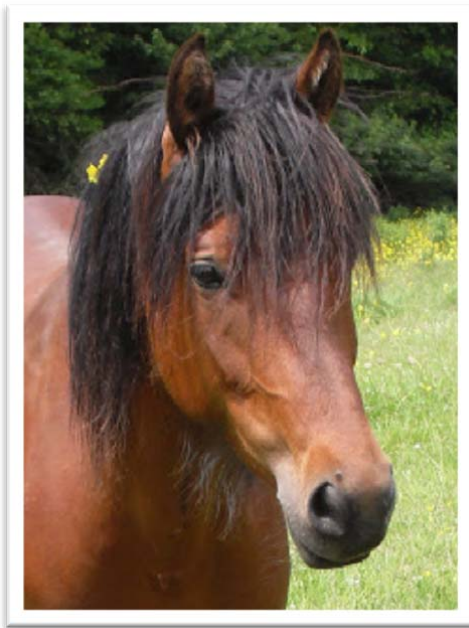
Alice trotted quickly away. What an airhead, she thought. She was so distracted that she almost trotted directly into Gayle. She stopped abruptly as Gayle pinned her ears and glared at her.

"Go away," she snarled. Startled, Alice swerved and raced swiftly across the pasture, her mane and tail streaming out behind her. Perhaps a camel is very fast, she thought. She slowed to a canter and looked around. Scooter is very fast, she recalled from past trail rides. She trotted over to him and fluttered her eyelashes.

"Hi Scooter."

Scooter glanced at her vaguely before resuming windsucking off Baby's back. Baby pinned her ears at Alice. "What do you want?" she asked.

"I wanted to ask Scooter if a camel is very fast," Alice explained.



Baby snorted. "You're an idiot," she told Alice, who was very offended.

Scooter burped. "I'm very fast," he said.

"Yes you are," Baby told him. "Let's go."

"You're fast too Alice," Scooter said as he walked away, following Baby. "Going fast is fun. Racing is the best!"

Racing, Alice thought. Who here knows about racing? She looked around and saw Robbie up ahead of her. She trotted briskly over and he looked up with his ears forward.

"Hello young lady," he greeted her.

"Robbie, do you know what a camel is? Is it very fast?"

Robbie drooped his lower lip thoughtfully. "I've heard of camels before," he said, and Alice's hopes soared. "I think they are racing animals. They don't race in America though, they race in the Arabian desert."

"What's that?" Alice asked in confusion.

“It’s a far away place with lots of sand,” Robbie explained. “Ask Jasper, he’s an Arabian. He might know more.”

“Okay!” Alice squealed excitedly, rushing off to find Jasper, and rather rudely forgetting to say thank you to Robbie for his assistance.

“Jasper!” Alice cried as she cantered over to where he was standing with Corissa and Magic. “Jasper, what’s a camel?”

“A camel? Why do you want to know that?” Jasper asked.

“Because,” Alice said, pausing for dramatic effect and shaking her mane luxuriantly. “I am a camel.”

Jasper gave a whinnying laugh. “No you’re not. You’re a horse. Camels are big, ugly, oddly-shaped animals with humps on their backs.”

Alice tilted her head, confused. “Like Shiloh?”

Jasper laughed again and Magic joined in, making Alice feel rather foolish. “No, Shiloh is a horse too. Camels are dirty and smelly and they spit at each other. You’re definitely not a camel.”

Alice was stunned. “But then...why would my rider say that I was a camel?” she asked in confusion. “She said I am. She said there’s a song about me!”

Corissa nickered gently to Alice. “Jasper is right,” she said. “You’re not a camel. But I think I have heard a song about Alice the Camel. An old friend of ours called Laddie used to sing it. He once lived with a kindergarten teacher and he knew a lot of funny songs.”

“Do you remember it?” Alice asked eagerly, but Corissa shook her head, much to Alice’s disappointment.

“I’m sorry. But you should ask Minstrel. He knows all the songs.”

“Thank you,” Alice called, remembering her manners this time as she raced off to find Minstrel. He was standing under the shade of the trees, lazily swishing at flies. Alice trotted politely up to him.

“Excuse me Minstrel. Will you please tell me the song about Alice the Camel?”

Minstrel looked at her. “All right,” he replied. Softly he began to sing.

“Alice the camel has...two humps.  
Alice the camel has...one hump.  
Alice the camel has...no humps.  
Because Alice is a horse.”

Alice stared at him in shock. All of this time she'd been running around trying to find out what a camel was, and as it turned out... "I'm a horse," she said. "But I already knew that!"

Minstrel gave her an odd look. "You're a funny one," he said. "Would you like to hear another song? I know a great one about a cow that jumped over the moon!"

"Save it for Daisy," Alice said crossly, annoyed at having wasted an entire afternoon. She trotted away, hearing Minstrel grumbling behind her.

"Not even so much as a thank you. Kids these days, so ungrateful. I swear, the next pony to come asking me for a song is getting kicked in the butt!"

Alice wandered towards the barn, still very annoyed and feeling rather foolish. She passed by Wanda, who looked up. "Did you find out what a hippo is?" Wanda asked.

"Go ask Minstrel," Alice replied quickly. "He knows a song about hippos. Maybe he'll sing it for you."

Wanda started towards Minstrel, and Alice giggled to herself as she trotted over to Quint, now standing apart from Nick.

"Quint, I found the fairy," she told her. "It's in that big patch of poison ivy by the gate, and it's waiting for you."

"Thanks!" Quint gasped, tossing her head and heading for the gate as Alice cantered off, laughing. Under the barn she found Vanessa, Essie and Almonzo.

"Hi guys," she greeted them, squishing herself in next to Almo.

"Hi camel," Vanessa said cheerfully.

Alice tossed her head. "Don't be a silly filly," she told her. "I'm not a camel."

"You're not?" Essie asked. "But I thought..."

"Nope," Alice replied. "I know for sure now. Alice is no camel. Alice is a horse."

# The (Slightly) Epic Saga of Buffalo Bill

Deep in the Connemara mountains of Ireland there lies a small house, with a thatched roof and stone walls. Behind the house is a stone walled pasture and a large potato patch.

On one not terribly special day, a pony was born in that there potato patch. Amidst the rocks and dirt (and potatoes), a small foal took his first wobbly steps. He was born with a light brown coat, black points, and a white star on his forehead.

“The star means he’s been blessed by the little people,” believed his owner. “Aye, that’s a leprechaun’s touch to be sure.”



And he was very pleased with the foal, as he had the mark of good luck on his forehead.

And so the pony grew up, munching on the sparse, scrubby grass. In the winter he sheltered against his mother’s side from the driving rain, as they huddled together in the lee of the house. And in the summer he sheltered against his mother’s side from the driving rain, as they huddled together in the lee of the house.

The pony was named Bill, after the owner’s grandfather, in the Irish tradition of keeping a good name going. And as the years passed by, he grew taller, but not much wider. There wasn’t much food on the farm, and everything that was available was gobbled up by Bill’s mother and the shaggy white donkey that shared their pasture. Sometimes Bill was so hungry that he would sneak into the potato patch and munch on a potato or two, but his owner would see him and come running out of the house, waving a stick in the air and swearing loudly in Irish. At first, this would cause a startled Bill to flee, but he soon learned just how long it took his owner to reach him from the house, and he would keep chewing on the potatoes until the man was almost close enough to rap him with the stick, then run off quickly to the other end of the pasture.

“Damn fool horse,” the owner would yell. “I’ll be glad to be rid of yer, so I will, as soon as someone will give me some money for yer.”

And every time anyone came along the narrow dirt road to the farm, Bill’s owner would try and sell him to them. But no-one ever wanted to buy the skinny little pony.

“So much for bringing good luck,” his owner spat one day, when a woman who might have wanted Bill had changed her mind after he stepped on her toe and almost broke it. She’d left in a hurry and Bill’s owner had thrown rocks at him until the pony cantered to the far end of the field and hid behind his mother and the wee donkey. “Fool horse, you’re nothing but trouble, so you are.”



Bill was rather saddened by this rejection, and he felt indignant. It was hardly his fault that he was so skinny and unkempt. The field had next to no grass and his owner never groomed him.

One morning, as the fog rose over the mountains to greet another grey and dreary day, Bill's owner came out to the field with a grin on his face.

"Top o' the mornin to yer," he greeted the horses. Bill was suspicious about his owner's good mood, and watched cautiously as the man harnessed Bill's mother to a cart and tied Bill to the back of it. He climbed up into the driver's seat and drove them down the road. Bill was delighted to see so much of the world, and he looked around a great deal. However he soon tired, and started lagging back. His mother turned her head and told him sharply that he was making her life much more difficult, trying to drag the cart backwards. Bill quickly sped up, doing his best to keep up with his mother.

After a few miles, they passed a sign that said "HORSE FAIR". Bill had never been to a horse fair, and he was very intrigued to see what it might involve. They carried on for several more miles before finally pulling into a town. The main street of the town was filled with horses and ponies, of all shapes and sizes. From huge draught horses to tiny Shetland ponies, they ranged along the road. A piebald cob came trotting towards them, being ridden bareback by a long-legged boy, who was also leading other ponies from either side. He passed rows of ponies so small that they were being dwarfed by dogs, and cart horses so big that the men holding them barely reached their shoulders. Bill stared around himself in amazement.

Bill's owner drove him and his mother through the thickest of the crowds, and Bill was very nervous, being so crowded on all sides. He walked quickly, keeping his eyes firmly fixed on his mother. They drove over to a large tree, and Bill's mother pulled up gratefully underneath it. Bill was pleased to have a rest, but it was not to be. His owner now untied Bill from the cart and led him back into the melee.

Bill was very worried now, without his mother beside him. He was, after all, only five years old, and up until now his entire life had been spent by the potato patch, with just his mother and the donkey for companionship. Now there were horses and ponies everywhere, and none of them seemed very friendly. Bill's owner led him over to where a man was shouting "Connemara ponies! Beautiful sturdy Connemara ponies! Buy one for your child today!" and he tied Bill to the fence. Bill turned his head to the left, and saw a fleabitten grey pony with a large head and short legs.

"Hello," said Bill.

The pony glanced at him without much interest. "Hello," he muttered.

"I'm Bill," he keenly introduced himself, pleased to have a friend.

"Spruce," the grey replied. "And that over on your other side is Barnacle."

Bill turned to see another grey pony, with a flowing mane and big dark eyes. He was very handsome, and several people nearby were admiring him. Barnacle fluttered his

eyelashes and looked as handsome as he was able. Spruce snorted, and Bill turned back to him.

“Thinks pretty highly of himself, so he does,” he told Bill. “Always preening and showing off, like.” And he swished his tail and closed his eyes, ignoring Bill, who didn’t like to interrupt anyone’s snooze time.

Bill stood there for a long time. His owner wandered away, came back, then gave Bill a brief slap on the neck and left again. Bill wasn’t particularly fond of him, so he didn’t miss him much. He watched with interest as Barnacle was untied several times and ridden by people looking to buy him. Spruce was trotted up by a few people as well, but nobody even spared a glance for poor Bill.

Eventually, the auction started. Each pony was led up to the auctioneer and the bidding would commence. Bill waited impatiently for his turn. Barnacle was first, and the bidding for him went on for some time, with several families eagerly competing to buy him. Finally he was sold for a very large figure, and he strutted away with his new owners, looking very well pleased with himself.

Bill was next, and with some trepidation he allowed himself to be led forward.

The auctioneer looked at him. “And now for something completely different,” he quipped, and the crowd laughed. “A rather ragged specimen but you can certainly see he’s got good solid bone – it’s all he’s got, so it is!” he joked, and the crowd laughed.

Bill felt embarrassed as the auctioneer started the bidding at a very low price. And even then, no-one would bid for him. Even when the auctioneer dropped the price even lower, right down to the lowest price of the day, nobody wanted Bill. The auctioneer shook his head and dropped his hammer.

“Lot 420, passed in. No sale,” he added, as though to rub it in. Oh well, Bill thought to himself. Now I can go home again. Maybe some more grass will have grown while I’ve been gone. For it seemed to Bill that he’d been gone for an awfully long time.

But when the handler led him away, he didn’t take him back to where he’d left his mother, standing under the tree. Instead he led him to a small enclosure with three other horses, who were all standing sadly in one corner. The man shoved Bill in with them and shut the gate, walking away.

Bill stood sadly and listened to the auctioneer’s call. He was selling Spruce now, and while he wasn’t commanding as high a price as Barnacle, at least people were bidding for him.

He decided that he really wanted to see his mother, so he called out to her. And called, and called, and called, but she never answered. After a while he started to lose his voice, and one of the other horses in the pen turned to him with a snarl and told him to “Shuddup, would you? You’re giving me a headache.”

“I’m sorry,” Bill apologized. “But I’m trying to find my mother. I left her a while ago and

now she won't know where to find me and take me home."

"She's long gone," the other horse, a hairy cob told him. "No-one's taking you home. Nobody wants you," he added, quite nastily.

"What's going to happen to me?" Bill asked fearfully.

The cob snorted disdainfully. "Don't you know? It's the end of the line for you, old chap. Any horses that don't get sold in the auction go to the slaughterhouse."

"What?" gasped Bill. "I don't want to die! I'm only five years old!"

And at this, a bay horse in the corner raised his head and looked at Bill with concern. "Really? You're just a kid. Poor thing, you've barely lived."

"I KNOW!" Bill insisted. "Isn't there any way out of this?"

"None," moped the cob, and the bay horse shook his head. "Sorry friend. I wish there were."

Bill sighed, and looked so sad that the bay horse felt sorry for him. So he started telling him stories about his life. "I'm old now," said the bay. "But when I was young I lived on a ranch in Wyoming. That's in America, a country far across the sea. There was lush green grass for as far as the eye can see, and no fences to hold us in. We would roam, in a huge herd, as free as the wind. Hundreds of us. Bays and sorrels and blacks and buckskins, like you."

"Like me?" Bill asked with interest.

"Well sure," the bay horse said. "In America, your colouring is called buckskin."

"I want to go!" exclaimed Bill. "How do I get there?"

But the bay horse shook his head. "You can't. It's too far. This is the end of the line for you, I'm afraid." And he lowered his head and proceeded to ignore Bill.

So Bill stood in the pen for the rest of the day, as the other horses and ponies were sold. Two more ponies joined them as the day wore on. Bill was tired, and hot, and bored, and very thirsty, as there wasn't any water in the pen, and the ground was very dry and dusty.

Finally a man came to take them away. He and two others led them down the road about half a mile, and then into a small field. There was a bit of scrubby grass in the field, and a small creek with muddy water. Bill immediately drank his fill, then chewed on the sparse grass. The other horses weren't too interested in food, so Bill had the pasture practically to himself.

The men leaned on the gate and looked over the horses. "Bunch of broken-down nags," one of them said.

“The wee pony isn’t too bad,” said the man who had led Bill. “Badly malnourished, but he’s only a young ‘un. Seems a shame to kill him.”

“Hardly worthwhile,” muttered the third man. “There’s barely enough meat on him to feed one dog, so there is.”

Bill’s ears had pricked up in alarm at the men’s conversation. They were going to kill him, and feed him to dogs? Not on my watch, thought Bill. I’m going to escape!

So after the men had left, Bill walked carefully around the perimeter of the field searching for a way out. It was raining softly on his bony back, and he felt rather dejected. But after a while the sun came out, and a rainbow appeared in the sky. Bill gazed idly up at it, wondering if it was the last rainbow he would ever see. But then he realized something very odd. The rainbow started over in the distance, far from where Bill stood, but it ended...right in the corner of his field!

Bill remembered the stories that his mother had told him as a foal, and he trotted over to the corner of the field where the rainbow touched down, hoping to find a pot of gold.

But he pulled up abruptly when he saw in front of him, instead of a shining pot of gold coins, a small and wrinkled little creature with a green hat and a nose that rather resembled a potato.

Bill pulled up with a start. “You’re not a pot of gold!” he announced.

“Of course not,” replied the leprechaun, for that’s what it was. “And what would you do with a pot of gold if I was one?”

“I would buy my passage to America,” Bill said. “I have always dreamed of going to America. Did you know that they have rolling pastures full of lush green grass, as far as the eye can see? And huge ranches with big herds of horses, all running together, as free as the wind?” And he sighed happily at the very thought of it.

The leprechaun chuckled. “Dreaming big, aren’t you? Well, maybe some day you’ll get there.” And he turned as though to leave.

“But I won’t!” Bill objected. “I went to a sale today, only nobody wanted to buy me, so now I’m here and tomorrow they’re going to...to...they’re going to kill me and feed me to the dogs!”

The leprechaun was shocked. “You poor fella. Well you’re in luck. You found the end of my rainbow, and so I owe you a wish. Close your eyes, my lad, hold very still, and wish real hard for that rolling pasture.”

So Bill closed his eyes tight, and wished as hard as he could that he would be in a beautiful rolling green pasture with a herd of horses running as free as the wind. And after a moment, his hooves began to tingle. And then his legs, and then his body. The tingling sensation traveled up his neck and into his head and right to the tips of his ears. It felt most peculiar but Bill did as the leprechaun had told him and held perfectly still.

Not a hair on his body twitched as he tingled and shivered all over.

Suddenly, it stopped. There was silence around him. Bill didn't dare open his eyes, he was so afraid that it was all a trick and that he was still in the field in Ireland. But after a while he dared to take a tiny peek.

Slowly, his eyes adjusted to the light and he looked around to see a wide rolling pasture. Above him were thousands and millions of tiny stars in a jet black sky that seemed to go on and on forever. And nearby was a herd of horses,

"I'm here!" Bill realized in amazement, then shuddered again as the howl repeated. "What is that noise?"

Out of the darkness nearby, a voice spoke. "It's just a coyote."

Bill looked towards the voice. "A coyote? What on earth's that?"

"What were you, born yesterday?" the voice retorted. "There's coyotes all over this ranch."

"Ranch?" Bill said with delight. "You mean...I'm on a ranch?"

"Sure," said the voice. "You're at the Wild Horse Ranch in Wyoming. Where did you think you were?"

"Uh..." Bill decided that his story wasn't very probable, even though it was totally true. For a moment he was unsure how to proceed, until he realized that he was standing on thick lush green grass. Immediately he dropped his head and started stuffing his face as quickly as possible.

Bill ate through the night and into the next morning, mowing the grass down with great enthusiasm. When the sun came up, he saw out of the corner of his eye that the voice he'd spoken to last night was a grey pony, about his size, who was lazily cropping the grass next to him.

"Top o' the mornin' to yer," he greeted the grey, who looked at him with some confusion.

"Howdy," the grey replied. "I'm called Rhinestone."

"I'm Bill," Bill replied.

"That's a bit of a dull name," Rhinestone told him. "You need a cowboy name if you're going to live on a ranch."

"To be sure," Bill replied. "But I don't know any cowboy names."

"What about Buffalo Bill?" Rhinestone suggested.

“That’ll be grand,” Bill replied.

“And you can’t be talkin’ like that no more,” Rhinestone drawled. “You gotta talk like an American now.”

“Alrighty then,” Bill said, and Rhinestone laughed. Two muscular quarter horses walked past them, their coats gleaming in the sun, and scoffed to themselves.

“Looks like Flintstone’s found himself a friend,” they teased.

“It’s Rhinestone,” the grey pony muttered through his teeth.

“No it ain’t,” they replied. “Your name is Fred, and the sooner you accept that and stop tryin’ to make yourself sound fancy, the better off you’ll be.” They wandered off, laughing to themselves and saying unpleasant things about Bill. Fred sighed, and went back to grazing.

Around midday, two cowboys rode out to check on their herd.

“What on earth is that?” one of them yelled, pointing at Bill. “One of them dang mustangs, joining into the herd.”

“Scrawny lookin’ thing, ain’t he?” drawled the other one, chewing on a piece of grass. “Well, he looks like he’s making up for lost time alright.” And they rode off and left Bill well enough alone.

As the days and weeks passed, Bill grew fat and his coat became healthy and glossy.

Sometimes he thought of his mother and the donkey, back in the scrubby field in Ireland, and he wished they had had such good luck as he had. I suppose I was blessed by the little folk after all, he mused as he drank clear spring water from a nearby stream. Rhinestone was never too far from his side, and the two became fast friends.

But then one day the ranchers came and rounded the horses up, driving them into an enclosed corral. Bill was frightened, nervous at being in such a small space with so many horses again, and worried about what his fate might be. But after a while, a rancher came in and caught him, leading him out with a rope halter. He was the man who had called Bill scrawny, but he turned out to be kind, and he taught Bill to wear a bridle and saddle, and be ridden. At first this seemed to Bill like part of his adventure, but now he thought that he wasn’t sure that this riding thing was a good idea. It seemed much too much like hard work!

After a while, the rancher tired of riding Bill. It took far too much effort keeping him going! And when the cows ran one way, Bill just stood and casually watched them go, without any intention of chasing them. The rancher tried putting long spurs on, but they jabbed Bill’s sides so uncomfortably that he bucked in protest.

“This horse is useless,” the rancher said. “We’ll have to be rid of him somehow.”

A shiver of fear went through Bill at his words, and that night he hatched a plan.

“I’m not being sold for dog food again,” Bill told Fred. “I’m running away.”

“Running away?” he drawled. “I don’t know if that’s such a great idea. What if you get eaten by coyotes?”

“I’ll be fine,” Bill replied, trying to sound confident. “I can outrun any of them coyotes.”

Fred shook his head, but he found that he was unable to sway Bill’s mind. Bill could be very stubborn when he felt like it. So that night, Bill and Fred wandered off, far from the herd, and into the wilderness.

For many days, weeks and months they traveled across the country, narrowly evading capture several times. They went to a racecourse, but those horses ran too fast. They went to a riding school, but those ponies worked far too hard. They both missed the freedom of the ranch in Wyoming, and the joy of running together in a big herd of horses, as free as the wind under the clear blue sky.

Eventually, one sunny morning, they wandered down to the end of a road, and found a rolling green pasture full of lush grass, and a big pond full of clear, clean water. Bill and Fred looked at one another in delight. This looked like just the place for them! The ponies hurried over to the pond and each took a long refreshing drink. They lowered his head again to crop at the tasty grass, then felt vibrations running through the earth beneath their feet. Both of the ponies’ heads shot up and they turned to see a herd of horses running down the hill towards them. Thundering down the hill, bays and chestnuts and blacks and greys.

And buckskins! thought Bill in delight. And he and Fred trotted over to join the other horses.

“Hello,” Bill said to a nearby horse. “What is this place?”

The horse, a sway-backed chestnut, replied “This place? It’s a farm and summer camp.” “What’s that?” Fred asked.

“Well, we live here all year round, and in the summer little girls come and ride us.”

“Only in the summer?” Bill asked, and the chestnut horse nodded.

“That sounds manageable,” Bill said thoughtfully.

“What about the winter?” Fred asked.

“We don’t do any work, but it does get awful cold,” the horse warned them. “Lots of deep snow.”

“I can handle the cold,” Bill said confidently. “I come from a place of rain and sleet.”

“Well, you’ll have to ask our esteemed leader,” the horse said. “His name’s Black Hawk. Come on, I’ll introduce you.”

So the horse led them over to a solid bay gelding with a white stripe down his face. He looked up at their approach with interest.

“What’s this you’re bringing me, Shiloh?” Black Hawk asked.

“Couple of strays,” Shiloh replied. “They reckon they might want to join us here at the farm.”

“Are they hard workers?” Black Hawk asked, eyeing Fred and Bill suspiciously.

“Of course,” Fred answered, and “To be sure,” Bill replied.



Hawk shook his head. “Well, you may be telling the truth or you may not, but either way, I don’t suppose I care. Long as you don’t have any pretensions about taking over around here, you can stay.”

So Bill and Fred settled down to graze in the pasture at Road’s End Farm, and they lived happily ever after. And nobody ever tried to feed Bill to their dogs again.

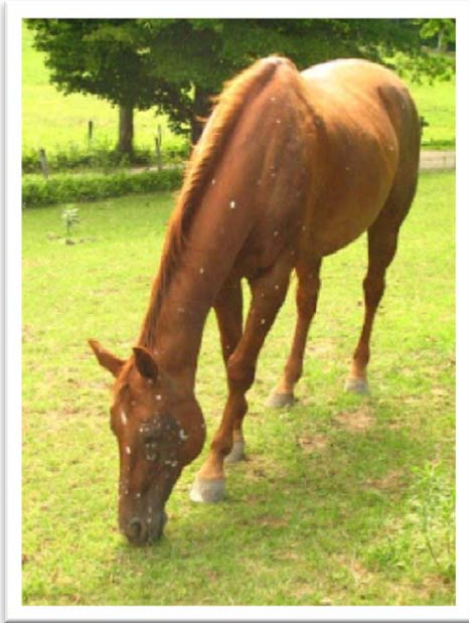


# How Sweet Pea Got Her Spots

One day Alice was gazing at her reflection in the pond and admiring her beauty when Sweet Pea walked up next to her and began to drink.

Alice couldn't help but glance over at her companion in order to reassure herself that while Sweet Pea might be taller, she was by no means better built, her coat wasn't any glossier than Alice's and she certainly lacked Alice's glamorous length and thickness of mane and tail, there was one area in which Sweet Pea clearly won over Alice, and that was in her spots.

Sweet Pea was covered in them. Her soft copper coat was speckled from tip to toe in white spots, all of varying shapes and sizes. Alice didn't have a bit of white anywhere on her, and normally this didn't bother her at all, as she felt that having a pure and unmarked bay coat was far more remarkable and impressive, not to mention the height of fashion.



But fashions come and go, and Alice had noticed that Destiny, having gotten rid of his spots a few years ago, was bringing them back. Perhaps I ought to have spots, Alice wondered. They would compliment my coat very nicely. I wonder how Sweet Pea got hers?

Now Alice couldn't help being curious, any more than she could help having four legs, or eating grass. It was just part of her nature, so without hesitation she raised her head and turned to Sweet Pea.

"How did you get your spots?" she asked.

Sweet Pea turned and looked at Alice. "My what?"

"Your spots," Alice said, pronouncing the words very clearly so that Sweet Pea could not misunderstand her. "You have little white spots all over you. How did they get there?"

"Oh those spots," Sweet Pea replied. "I thought you meant... well, never mind. It happened during a particularly bad snowstorm. You see, I couldn't find any shelter so I was obliged to stand out in the snow, and the snowflakes settled onto my coat and stayed there. They never melted away."

"Wow!" said Alice, very impressed. "How fascinating. I think I shall try that."

And so every time it snowed that winter, Alice dashed out from under the cover of the barn and stood in the snow, determined to convince some of the flakes to settle on her permanently. But every time the snowflakes landed on her, they melted off again. Some

snow did settle on her back, Alice took especial care to keep it there, refusing to roll or shake it off. But that plan was thwarted by Lesley, who brushed it right off Alice's back one day when she was distracted with a bucket of grain. Alice was most disappointed, and although she was sure that Lesley meant well, she was very grumpy about it for almost ten whole minutes afterwards, until it began to snow again, and Alice quickly dashed to the highest point she could find and waited for the flakes to settle on her coat forever.

However, after almost a week of this, she was no closer to having spots on her than she had been before, and worse, the snow was beginning to melt.

She trotted over to Sweet Pea in great indignation.

"Sweet Pea!" she announced. "It didn't work! I couldn't get the snowflakes to stay on me and turn into spots, no matter how hard I tried."

Sweet Pea looked surprised.  
"Snowflakes turning into spots?  
What a strange idea."

Alice was shocked. "But you told me that's how you got yours," she pointed out.



Sweet Pea laughed and shook her head. "Well that's just silly. How can that be possible? I'm sure I never said any such thing."

Alice sighed, but she was not giving up. "So then, how did you get your spots?"

"Well," said Sweet Pea, "It happened one summer when Skip was painting the trim around the barn. I fell asleep right under his ladder, and he was waving the paintbrush all around and he splattered me all over with spots! And oil paint doesn't come off easily, you know," she added in a warning voice. "Just ask Tom, he'll tell you!"

So Alice went in search of Skip, hoping that he would have some painting to do. Sure enough, only a few days later, Skip walked towards the barn with a bucket of paint in his hand. Alice quickly scooted over under his ladder and closed her eyes, waiting for the onslaught of drippy paint to give her beautiful white spots.

But her plan failed. Lesley noticed her standing there and called out to Skip, telling him to wait. She grabbed her magical lasso and put it around Alice's neck, giving the pony no option but to go with her. Lesley led Alice out of the feedlot and let her go, then turned to put up the gate. The moment the magical lasso was off Alice's neck, she shot back into the feedlot and raced up underneath Skip's ladder once more.

Lesley was laughing as she walked back up to get the pony. "You turkey," she told Alice.

“Anyone would think you were trying to get covered in paint.”

She caught Alice again, and once more Alice was unable to resist the magical lasso that led her out of the feedlot. Alice was ready to go the moment that Lesley released her, but this time Lesley kept tight hold of her magical lasso and put the gate up before setting Alice free. Her plan thwarted, Alice stomped an angry hoof, pinned her ears at Lesley and ran off in indignation.

Sweet Pea was standing with Bittersweet and her other friends.

“Sweet Pea!” Alice called, cantering up to her. “Lesley won’t let me stand under Skip’s ladder and get paint dropped on me!”

Sweet Pea looked surprised. “Why on earth would you want to do a thing like that? Standing under ladders is bad luck.”

“Well you did it,” Alice objected. “That’s how you got your spots.”

“I most certainly did not!” replied Sweet Pea. “As if I would be foolish enough to do such a thing. Besides, if I even tried, Lesley would remove me with her magical lasso.”

Alice pouted, not wanting to admit that that was precisely what had happened. “Well then, how did you get your spots?” she asked, her irritation growing. “If you didn’t stand out in a snow storm, and you didn’t get splattered with paint, where did they come from?”

“Well,” said Sweet Pea. “The fact of the matter is, I’m part horse, part deer.” She nodded at Alice, trying to express great wisdom and failing somewhat. “I know that the campers have long suspected it, and they’re right.”

Alice looked at Sweet Pea in utter disbelief. “I don’t believe you,” she said. “You’re lying.”

Sweet Pea was horribly offended. “Excuse me! How dare you, you upstart obnoxious little creature!” And she pinned her ears and told Jack to chase Alice off, which he did without hesitation.

Alice wandered grumpily along to the pond for a drink, but the moment she lowered her head to the water and saw her reflection, she felt miserable. She really was a remarkably pretty pony, but now all she could see when she looked at herself was her lack of spots.

She heard hoofbeats come up behind her, and turned her head away. “Go away,” she muttered.

The hoofbeats stopped beside her. “Are you all right?” asked a kind voice, and Alice turned to see Cassidy standing next to her.

Alice sniffed. “Do I look like I’m all right?” she asked.

Cassidy looked her over. "Well you look the same as always," she said carefully. "But you seem upset, and you're usually so friendly."

"Don't look at me," Alice sulked. "I'm so ugly."

Cassidy laughed, and Alice turned to her with an outraged look. Cassidy backed up a step, lowering her head submissively. "Sorry," she said quickly. "I didn't mean to offend you, only... you're not ugly. You're quite the prettiest pony around here, and you know it."

"I used to think I was," muttered Alice. "But not any more. You see, I want spots like Sweet Pea has, and she won't tell me how to get them, because she's mean, and so I'm stuck being all plain and boring and ugly. I hate her!" And she stamped a foreleg into the water, splashing them both.

Cassidy stood calmly by and watched this temper tantrum. "Why do you want spots?" she asked.

"Because... well, because I... I don't have any, and I'm boring and ugly," Alice replied.

"But you're not," Cassidy said. "Every pony looks different, and it's a good thing too, because imagine if we all looked identical! No-one would be able to tell the difference between us, and you would end up teaching beginners, and Daisy would get ridden by counsellors, and imagine the chaos that would cause!"

And Alice giggled, despite herself. "And Windstar would be able to bite everyone because no-one would know that it was him!" she said happily.

"Exactly," Cassidy agreed. "It doesn't bear thinking about. Some ponies are born with spots, and some aren't. You weren't, but that doesn't make you any less beautiful! Do you know what the prettiest thing about you is?" she asked, and Alice pricked up her ears in interest.

"What?"

"Your spirit. The way you run around the pasture like you own it, and that you're not afraid of anything or anyway. You're a happy, vivacious, confident little pony and that's not something that's in the colour of your coat, that beauty comes from inside you."

Alice felt much happier. "Really? You think I'm beautiful?" And she tossed her little head and fluttered her nostrils at Cassidy.

"Yes indeed," Cassidy replied. "Very much."

Alice was very pleased. "I think you're beautiful too," she said graciously. "Even though you're so old."

"Thank you," said Cassidy, too pleased to have Alice back to her usual tactless self to be offended.

“Now if you’ll excuse me,” Alice said primly. “I have a message to deliver to Sweet Pea.”

“What are you going to tell her?” Cassidy asked.

“That I don’t care for her spots or how she got them, and that I’m beautiful just the way I am, of course”, Alice said cheerfully.

And she trotted off, her head held high, across the pasture, looking every bit as beautiful as she knew herself to be, and would never doubt again.

# The Magic Pony

Once upon a time, not so very long ago, there was a little black pony who lived in a very small field. The pony had no companions and was very lonely, and there was next to no grass to eat either. Really the situation was quite depressing.

But this pony was never one to dwell overmuch on her troubles, and so time passed without incident for several years, as the little pony wandered around the barren pasture, sniffing and hoping at the dry dusty ground.

One dark and stormy night, the pony was snoozing in the corner of her field when she heard an almighty CRASH! Startled awake, she turned to see a sight that if she hadn't seen it with her own eyes, she'd have thought it was impossible, and even on seeing it, wondered if she hadn't gone mad, or else was still dreaming.

For right there in front of her, crumpled in a heap on the ground, was a witch. Now the pony, having lived such a dull and solitary life up to this point, didn't have the faintest idea that the woman was a witch, but you and I well know the telling signs, and the person lying at the pony's feet possessed every one.

She wore a black cloak over a black dress, had long dark hair, a sharply pointed nose, and a tall black hat with a wide brim and a high point. What's more, as if there had been any doubt, pieces of a shattered broomstick were ranged across the small field.

The pony had no knowledge of witches to warn her to be wary of this creature, so she approached with very little fear, and nudged the black shape with her nose.

The witch leapt up with a cry, brandishing her wand.

“WHAT! NO! BACK, FOUL BEAST!”

The pony was surprised by this greeting, but lacking experience in greetings of a more friendly sort, didn't take it too much amiss.

“I'm sorry,” she apologised to the witch. “I didn't mean to startle you. But you have landed in my field and I didn't know what you were.”

The witch scowled. “I'm a witch, of course. Any fool can see that.” She looked the pony over with a frown. “You're a pretty poor specimen, aren't you?”

The pony hung her head at this. “I'm afraid so,” she admitted. “But I've lived in this field my entire life, and as you can see there isn't much room to run around and get strong, nor is there much grass to eat to fatten me up.”

“I can see that's true,” agreed the witch. “What a wretched existence. Why are you still here?”

“I can’t leave,” the pony explained. “The gates are locked and the fences much too high to jump.”

The witch shrugged, none too interested in the pony’s plight, being far more concerned with her own. She looked down at the shards of broomstick in the moonlight.

“Will you look at that?” she lamented. “Beyond repair, that is. I knew this would happen! It’s all that blasted cat’s fault.”

The pony was very interested. “What’s a blasted cat?” she asked.

The witch looked at her. “Don’t know a thing, do you?” she asked. “Well I don’t suppose as you would, being locked up here your whole life. Every witch should have a familiar – an animal that travels with them and acts as a companion and guardian, of sorts. And I had a cat, but he had the audacity to walk out on me last week, and since then I’ve had nothing but rotten luck!”

“Why did he leave?” the pony asked.

“I’m sure I don’t know,” retorted the witch angrily. “Else he wouldn’t have left. But now I’m without a familiar or a means of transportation, and I’ve got ever so many deliveries to make tonight!”

The pony’s curiosity was roused. “What are you delivering?” she asked.

“Dreams,” the witch told her. “Well, nightmares really. I’m a dreamcatcher by profession.”

“I thought you were a witch,” the pony replied in some confusion.

“Don’t be stupid,” the witch told her. “One can’t just be a witch, not in this day and age. Everyone is having to take on extra work to make ends meet. I daresay that’s why the cat left. Didn’t like this part of the job. Too much flying about, said it made him travel sick.”

“I thought you didn’t know why he left,” the pony commented.

“Well of course I don’t. Travel sickness is hardly a reasonable explanation for leaving the service of a kind mistress such as myself!”

“Are you very kind then?” the pony asked.

“Indeed I am,” replied the witch. “I only work nights, so the cat had all day to himself to snooze or sunbathe or chase mice, whatever he liked to do. All I asked of him was that he

accompany me each evening, and he couldn't even deign to do that. Cats! I'm done with them," she announced. "I shall get myself a fine rat, or perhaps a crow."

"Oh!" said the pony. "What a shame. I'd almost hoped..."

"That I might take you?" exclaimed the witch, with a cackle of laughter. "Just look at the size of you. How exactly do you propose to fit onto my broomstick?"

"Well I wouldn't," the pony admitted. "But you don't actually have a broomstick anymore, do you?"

The witch narrowed her eyes at the pony. "Insolence," she muttered. "How dare you? Why, I've a good mind to transfigure you into a mushroom or-or a slug!" she announced.

"Anything would be preferable to this," the pony said sadly. "I'm so lonely and bored in this tiny field. Do you think the life of a mushroom or a slug would be more diverting? I'm dying to have an adventure."

"Pfft," muttered the witch, turning her back on the pony to gather the broken pieces of her broomstick. "I've had plenty enough of them. Everywhere I go, some mishap seems to befall me."

"But you must have seen so much," said the pony dreamily. "I would love nothing more than to see the world. And fancy, to be able to fly above it and look down on everyone's heads and see what they are all doing."

"I can assure you, they're doing nothing of interest," grumbled the witch. "Oh this is hopeless!" and she threw down the pieces of broomstick again in a huff.

The pony sighed sympathetically, then looked up to see the witch looking at her with a new expression in her face.

"I wonder," the witch muttered to herself. "It might just be possible... I might just have enough..." She started rummaging through her pockets, pulling out (amongst other things) three white mice, a croaking toad, a handful of four leaf clovers, various pots and jars full of horrible looking things and several small black bags tied at the neck with labels covered in tiny spidery writing.

The pony stared in amazement at the menagerie in front of her. The mice sat huddled together, looking rather miserable.

"Why don't they run away?" she asked the witch.



“They’re blind, of course,” the witch replied. “Not much magic in them if they’re just mice, but blind mice, and three of them – there’s a powerful bit in that, if you know how to use it right. Which I do,” she bragged. She kept digging through her pockets, then pulled out a handful of long white hair.

“Aha!” cried the witch. “Here it is.”

“What is that?” the pony asked.

“Unicorn hair,” the witch announced. “Very powerful. I was saving it for a particularly loathsome vengeance spell, but I suppose I can sacrifice a strand or two. Now, hold still.”

And she tied one strand of the unicorn’s hair around each of the pony’s legs.

After shoving everything else back into her pockets and standing well back with her wand raised dramatically over her head, the witch began to chant.

“Double double, toil and trouble  
From this place of dirt and rubble  
Beneath the cloak of starry night  
Give this pony the gift of flight  
Across the heavens swiftly fly  
Like a comet through the sky  
With this charm of powerful trouble  
I command thee – on the double!”

If she could have clapped, the pony would have done so, but instead she simply capered around the field in delight. “What a wonderful spell!” she cried happily. “Did it work? Will I be able to fly?”

“Look down,” said the witch smugly, and when the pony did look down at her hooves, she was astonished to realise that they were no longer touching the ground. True, they were hovering only inches above it, and also true, her astonishment caused her to clatter back to the earth with a start, but it couldn’t be denied. She’d just flown!

With the witch’s instruction and much determination, soon the pony was able to fly quite well around the field. She could have flown clear away and gone off on her own, leaving the witch behind, but such treachery never occurred to the grateful mare. Instead, as she skidded to a halt in front of the witch after her tenth joyful lap around the field, she was so pleased with her new ability that she’d have done anything the witch asked of her.

“What is your name?” the witch asked as the pony flew happily in circles around her, swooping up into the air and down again for the pure joy of it. But she came back down

to earth at this question, saddened to admit that she had no name, having never been given one. A tear escaped from one eye and slid all the way down her nose, dropping off the end and landing in the dust.

“Oh don’t get all upset,” the witch snapped, having no patience for misery or tears. “I’ll simply give you a name. I shall name you... oh... Magic. Black Magic, as you are as black as the sky you shall soon fly through.”

“Black Magic!” the pony squealed joyfully. “Oh what a marvellous name!” And she kicked up her heels and flew up into the air and turned a full somersault from happiness.

“Now don’t you be doing that while I’m on your back,” the witch warned as Magic returned to the earth next to her.

“Of course not!” Magic cried. “I shall be the smoothest ride you’ve ever had. Oh, won’t you climb onto my back so that we may fly together through the stars?”

“Why else do you think I cast that spell, if not to do that very thing?” the witch muttered, but she wasn’t really angry. Truth be told, the pony’s enthusiasm was infectious, and even the crotchety witch was feeling happier by the moment.

She gathered up her voluminous skirts and sprang onto Magic’s back. “My goodness!” she yelped. “You are the skinniest thing I’ve ever sat on! This will not do.” And with a wave of her magic wand and a few clever words, she turned Magic from a skinny, unkempt creature into a chubby pony with a glossy coat and the broadest back imaginable.

“Much better,” said the witch, settling herself and grabbing up a handful of Magic’s mane. “And now – to the stars!”

Quivering with excitement, Magic gathered her now powerful hindquarters and sprang up into the sky. Higher and higher and higher she rose until she could very nearly touch the moon!

“Where to?” she asked the witch.

“Second star to the right,” the witch replied, her voice quite cheerful. “And straight on til morning!”

Magic cheerfully swung to the right, almost unseating her rider, and shot forward through the stars. She was filled with delight as she left the dusty, barren field far behind her, and flew over places that she’d never seen, or even dreamed about. Magic saw glistening lakes, tall towering pines, rolling green meadows, and high snowy mountains,

and every new sight brought another rush of joy through the pony's body. And it wasn't just the pony that was enjoying herself. Had Magic been able to turn her head around to see her rider, she'd have barely recognised her. The witch's scowling countenance had changed in an instant into a happy smile, and even her long pointed nose didn't seem so severe or frightening anymore.

And so Magic and the witch flew to a clearing in the woods where the witch's house was, and it was a beautiful place, made all of gingerbread. There was plenty of lush green grass in the meadow around the house, which Magic ate every day in the warm sunshine before heading off into the starry night to dispense nightmares to the unsavoury characters of the world who very much deserved to have their dreams disturbed, or so the witch said.

Many years passed, and Magic and the witch became inseparable. Together they flew through thunderstorms and past hurricanes, fought duels with wizards and chased down unicorns and other magical creatures for their magical properties. And during the days, when Magic had nightmares of her own about being trapped once more in that tiny, barren field, the witch quietly stole her nightmares and bottled them up, and buried them deep inside her cellar so that they would never trouble the pony again.

But eventually, after many years, Magic began to get tired. She could no longer fly as swiftly through the heavens as before, nor did she leap and frolic around the meadow as she once had, preferring to stand quietly in the shade of the oak trees and listen to the gentle whispering of the creek.

One day, they chanced to fly over a farm where a herd of horses were sleeping under the stars. Magic slowed in her flight, gazing down in rapture at the tranquil scene beneath her hooves.

"Look," she breathed softly to the witch. "What a beautiful place!"

"Yes yes," muttered the witch. "Come on, we've got work to do."

And so Magic had flown on, carrying her witch to whatever destination she demanded, but she couldn't forget about the farm. Every day when she dozed, she dreamed of the rolling pasture with plenty of green grass to eat, softly rippling ponds to drink from, and tall pine trees to shelter beneath.

But most of all, she dreamed of other horses and ponies that might be her friends. For although Magic had lived a happy life with the witch, she was a crotchety mistress, and Magic had never had a true friend.

But the witch wasn't completely heartless. She knew what Magic dreamed of, for she was a dreamcatcher, after all. And no matter how many times she snatched up Magic's

dreams and bottled them away, Magic kept on dreaming of the same thing.

And so one evening, she swung herself onto the black pony's broad back, and took up a handful of her mane. But in her other hand she carried a shiny new broomstick. She stroked the pony's black neck, smoothing down her silky warm coat.

"Why are you bringing a broomstick?" Magic asked. "Are you afraid of falling off? Please don't be! I know I stumbled the other night, but I didn't mean to, and I won't do it again. That tiny star got in my way and quite tripped me up, the silly thing."

"I need the broomstick to take me home," the witch explained. "For this is to be our last flight together."

Magic was so shocked as to be struck completely dumb. Then she objected. "But – you can't mean it? Please, please don't make me go back to that barren field."

"Of course not," the witch said. "What do you take me for, some malevolent evil creature? You should know better than that. We will go to the farm at the end of the road, and I shall leave you there."

Magic froze in place, barely a hair on her body moving. "Really? You mean it?"

"I do."

And so Magic sprang up into the air with all the enthusiasm that she'd shown so long ago, that very first time, and flew as swiftly as she was able to the farm. She set down gently in the pasture and the herd of horses looked over at her in surprise.

The witch dismounted and carefully untied the strands of unicorn hair from each of the pony's four legs. She took the pony's head in her hands and pressed her forehead against Magic's, and they stood that way for a moment, knowing that words couldn't express the way they felt about one another. For Magic's part, she was eternally indebted to the witch for taking her away from that dreadful barren field and showing her the world. And for the witch, Magic had gone from being a mere form of transportation, enchanted in a moment of need, into her most trusted and loyal companion.

Hoofbeats approached, and the witch, with one parting touch on Magic's neck, flew quickly away on her broomstick. Magic stared up at her, disappearing into the night sky. "Hello," said a nearby voice, and Magic turned to see a kind looking bay mare standing in front of her. "What brings you here?"

"I'm looking for a friend," Magic admitted. "Will you be my friend?"

“Of course,” said the other mare. “My name is Corissa. What’s yours?”

And so Magic came to live at the farm at the end of the road, still racing as fast and as swiftly as she could, even across the earth. Her back was so broad that no saddle would fit her properly, but she was still a wonderfully comfortable bareback ride. Magic was loved and cared for beyond her wildest dreams, and to this very day, Corissa remains her very best and closest friend.

But Magic never forgot about the witch, and if you think that the witch forgot about Magic, you only have to look up at the night sky over Road’s End Farm, and you might just see a dark shape flit across the sky above your head. You might dismiss it as a bird or a bat or a figment of your overactive imagination, but it just might be the witch, flying past to check on her old friend, who is fast asleep in the pasture, dreaming of zooming through the stars.



# I Do Believe in Fairies



It was a warm spring day, the last of the winter's snow having melted away, and the horses and ponies at Road's End Farm were enjoying the warmth and green grass coming through in the Horseshoe pasture.

Quintessence was munching on some particularly tasty new shoots when she heard a soft tinkling sound nearby. Looking around, she soon located the source. Sitting on a dandelion flower in front of her was a

very small, very beautiful fairy with a golden dress and silver wings. She shook her long golden hair, preening and showing off, so Quint shook her mane, not wishing to be upstaged by such a tiny creature.

As her long, luxuriant mane settled back against her neck, Quint looked down to see if the fairy was impressed. The little creature was half off the dandelion, clinging to the flower with her tiny hands, and carefully dragging herself back up.

"Nasty, horrid creature," the fairy was muttering as she clambered back aboard the yellow flower. "Unseating me like that on purpose, I daresay."

Quint apologised quickly. "I didn't mean to, I'm terribly sorry."

The fairy gazed up at Quint in surprise. "You can see me!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, of course," Quint replied. "You are rather small, so I do have to squint a little, but you're most definitely there."

"What are you?" the fairy demanded suspiciously. "Changeling? Witch? Some kind of awful hobgoblin?"

"Of course not!" Quint replied, greatly offended by such ugly accusations. "I'm a horse."

"How very peculiar," the fairy said. "A horse that believes in fairies." She looked around at the rest of the grazing herd. "How many of your companions are likewise so enlightened?"

"Oh, none of them," Quint answered disdainfully. "But wait! I will introduce you to my brother. He never believes me when I say I can hear the fairies, but now I can prove it!"

She raises her head to whinny to Nick, then was startled into silence as the fairy flew up and clamped her tiny body across Quint's nostrils, pinching them closed.

“Don’t!” the creature cried. “He won’t be able to see me if he doesn’t believe. And you know what happens if someone says that they don’t believe in fairies, and means it, don’t you?” she asked.

Quint shook her head, hoping to dislodge the fairy’s death grip on her nose, but the creature clung on tightly.

“Why, every time those dreadful words are spoken, a fairy somewhere falls down dead!” she announced.

Quint was horrified at such a prospect, and made a mental note never to speak about fairies again in Nick’s presence, in case he should declare his disbelief out loud and so murder some poor innocent fairy.

“So you see,” the fairy went on. “It’s really a matter of the utmost importance.”

Quint was now finding the fairy’s grip on her nose to be horribly uncomfortable, and as she didn’t seem to be planning to let go any time soon, Quint decided to take matters into her own hooves, so to speak. There was only one way to dislodge the creature, and so she snorted hard, sending the fairy spiralling in ungraceful loops across the pasture and crashing down hard into the grass.

Feeling instantly guilty, Quint trotted across to where the fairy had landed and peered down into the grass to see the poor thing looking rather bedraggled.

“Ugh! Awful creature!” cried the fairy as she stood up, her golden dress dripping and her long hair gone lank and stringy. “Just look at the state of me!”

“Well you shouldn’t have pinched me so hard,” Quint retorted. “It was really very uncomfortable.”

The fairy was not done glaring at the golden mare. She wrung out her dress with her little hands, and shook out her hair, then stood fluttering her wings every so prettily to dry them. Quint watched, spellbound by the tiny creature’s beauty.

“Now, I shall sit up on one of those tall flowers and dry off,” she informed Quint, rather imperiously. “So mind you don’t eat me!”

“Of course not!” Quint replied. “As though I would do such a thing. Eat a fairy, indeed.”

“Well you’d be surprised how often it happens,” the fairy told Quint as she spread her dress out around her to dry. “Although how any creature could be so stupid I’m sure I don’t know.”

“Well I’m sure that I won’t eat you,” Quint promised. “In fact, I shall stay here and watch over you until you are quite dry and ready to leave.”

The fairy seemed to accept this, and closed her pretty eyes to soak up the sun. Quint

stood a careful watch over her, occasionally huffing a warm breath across her little friend to assist her in drying off. This was unappreciated, however.

“Do stop that! Your breath smells awful,” the fairy snapped, and Quint apologised profusely. She stood very still and kept a close and careful eye on the fairy. For almost a full minute she was a perfect guardian, but then a particularly juicy blade of grass caught her eye.

It won't hurt to take my eye off her, just for a moment, Quint thought. But one moment turned into two, and two turned into three, and soon enough Quint had wandered well away from the fairy's patch of grass.

She sidled up alongside Nick and he swished his tail, brushing a very pestering fly off her flank.

“Thank you,” she said graciously.

“No problem,” Nick replied affably. “What have you been up to all this time?”

“I was talking to a fairy,” Quint told him. “She was very beautiful, although rather rude. She even warned me not to eat her! As if I would—” Abruptly Quint remembered that she was supposed to be watching over the fairy, and raced off across the pasture to check on her.

As she approached the place where the fairy had been, she was horrified to see that that patch of grass had been eaten up by none other than Puck, who had the audacity to still be standing there, chewing on dandelion flowers.

“Puck! You dreadful thing! You've eaten my fairy!” Quint cried in anguish.

Puck raised his oversize head and looked at her in some confusion.

“Did not,” he said simply.

“You did too! Why, you're eating the very flower that she was sitting on! Oh Puck, how could you?!”

Puck chewed his mouthful of flowers thoughtfully. “Yum yum,” he told her.

“NO!” Quint cried, stricken with horror. “You horrid excuse for a pony, how dare you have done such a thing?!”

The whole herd was now watching as Quint bared her teeth and lunged at the hapless Puck. He would've fought back, naturally, had Nick not been bearing down on him at a fast trot, determined to defend his sister's honour. Not even Puck was fool enough to stick around for that, and he beat a hasty retreat.

“Oh Nick,” Quint gasped melodramatically. “The most terrible thing has happened. That – that awful creature has eaten a fairy!”



Nick came to an abrupt halt and glared at Quint so furiously that even she quailed slightly under his glowering look.

“Oh for crying out loud, Quint!” he grumbled. “How many times do I have to tell you? There’s no such thing as---”

But he never got to finish his sentence, because Quint lunged at him, snapping hard at his mouth, and he was so astonished that he was rendered momentarily speechless.

“How dare you!” he hollered.

“I’m sorry,” Quint apologised quickly. “But you can’t go around saying such things! Every time someone says that, do you know what happens?” She paused for dramatic effect, but Nick’s bored expression took some of the thrill out of the answer. “A fairy falls down dead!”

“Well then,” Nick muttered. “Maybe I should walk around repeating it over and over so that there aren’t any fairies left for you to be prattling on about night and day.”

And he was tempted to do just this, but the look of horror on Quint’s face was so great that he restrained himself. Bored of her remonstrations against the genocide of fairy-kind, he soon wandered off. Quint let him go, her faith in his goodness shattered.

“What a deplorable animal,” said a soft, tinkling voice behind Quint.

The mare spun around in amazement. “Fairy! Where are you?”

The fairy giggled, her voice still coming from behind Quint. “I’m right here.”

Quint spun around again, unable to locate the fairy. “Are-are you a ghost?” she whispered in horror.

“Of course not,” the fairy said, climbing out of Quint’s mane and sliding down her face before fluttering up in front of her and hovering like a tiny golden hummingbird before her eyes. “Did you really think I was daft enough to allow that prehistoric looking creature to eat me?”

“Not at all,” Quint assured her. “I would never have thought such a thing of you. Naturally.”

“Indeed,” the fairy said sarcastically. “Well now, it’s time for me to---” She broke off and let out a shrill shriek, diving into Quint’s forelock to hide. Quint looked around in astonishment.

“What’s wrong? I don’t see anything?”

The fairy parted the mare’s thick forelock like curtains and poked her head out for a moment, shrieked again and disappeared back in. Quint rolled her eyes up to try and see

what was going on between her ears, but without any measure of success, her extortions only causing Peppy who was passing by at the time to give her a very strange look.

“Blondes,” he muttered to Buddy, who chuckled rudely.

On any other day, Quint would have demanded an apology from them for such rudeness, or at least have had Nick chase them off on her behalf, but she was too distracted to bother with those two today.

“You’re afraid of Buddy and Peppy?” she asked the fairy. “There’s no need. I’m much bigger and more important than them.”

“Not them, you foolish mare,” the fairy said softly into Quint’s left ear. “That abominable creature stalking towards us through the grass right this moment!” And Quint felt the fairy burrow deeper into her forelock as she looked around and suddenly located the source of the fairy’s anguish.

“That? Why, that’s just a cat!”

“Just a cat? JUST a CAT?!” cried the fairy. “Don’t you know that cats are the mortal enemies of all fairies? What else do you think cats exist for if not to chase down and murder poor helpless fairies such as myself?” And she sobbed excessively into Quint’s forelock.

“Well it can’t get you up there, so you don’t need to be afraid,” Quint told the fairy. “I’m much bigger and more important than Sunny, too.”

The fairy ceased her relentless sobs, but she seemed little pacified.

“Cats are tricky creatures,” she sniffed. “One must always be on one’s guard against them. And that one is particularly troublesome. He’s constantly on the prowl for my kind. We fight back, of course, as much as we are able. You see that bend in his tail? A fairy did that,” she added proudly.

“Really?” Quint asked, impressed. “How did it manage?”

“Well, I’m not sure,” the fairy admitted. “I never did hear the full story. But it was certainly an injury sustained during an altercation with a fairy. That much I know with Absolute Certainty,” she said grandly.

“How impressive,” Quint said admiringly. “Never fear. You’re safe with me. I shall protect you.”

“Oh that fills me with such confidence,” the fairy said bitterly, but Quint had never understood sarcasm very well, and she felt rather pleased that the fairy had decided to trust her.

“What should I do?” Quint asked, standing very still in the hopes that Sunny wouldn’t

notice her.

“Nothing,” the fairy replied softly. “Just act natural.”

“Act natural,” Quint repeated. “I can do that.” And she shook her head dramatically, her long mane fluttering out around her neck.

“AAARRRGGGHHH!!” cried the fairy. “What are you doing, you ridiculous creature? Are you trying to shake me loose and get me killed?”

“Oh goodness,” Quint apologised. “I didn’t think! I’m so sorry.”

The fairy was feeling rather dizzy now, and had to grip tightly to Quint’s forelock so as not to fall out. “Just be nonchalant,” she told Quint.

“Non---what?” Quint asked in confusion.

The fairy sighed in exasperation. “Never mind. Just act how you normally act in the field. Don’t make that cat suspicious.”

Quint thought for a moment about what she normally did in the field. At first she was at a loss to remember, but then she saw a particularly juicy blade of grass and lowered her head to munch on it. A flash of orange caught her eye and suddenly there was Sunny, right in front of her, his green eyes staring rudely into her face.

Quint snorted in astonishment and raised her head swiftly. “What do you want?” she asked the cat.

Sunny smiled at her and stretched. “Nice day, isn’t it?” he purred. Quint had never known Sunny to be so friendly, as he usually just stalked around the farm imperiously, thinking he was better than everyone and picking fights with the other cats.

“Certainly,” Quint replied, thinking it was best to be polite.

“I’m looking for a fairy. Haven’t seen one, have you?” Sunny asked, opening his mouth wide to show off his gleaming sharp teeth.

“Of course not,” Quint said quickly. “I’ve never seen a fairy in my life.”

“You’re a liar,” Sunny snapped. “You were talking to one only moments ago. I have excellent hearing, you know,” he boasted. “It’s one of my many excellent qualities.”

“How nice for you,” Quint replied, turning away.

“Rude creature!” hissed the big orange cat, leaping in front of Quint once again. “Friend to the fairies,” he scowled. “I might have known. You’re as bad as your brother.”

Quint was so astonished that she ignored the fairy’s urgent whisperings in her ear to cease the conversation and remove herself from the cat’s vicinity at once. She swivelled

her ear backwards and then swung it forwards again, knocking the fairy back into her forelock before peering curiously down at the cat.

“Nick? Why, he doesn’t believe in fa--- such things at all,” she said.

“Not that great lunk, you fool,” Sunny growled. “Your other brother. The dearly departed,” he added as way of a clue.

Quint blinked. “You mean Oliver?” The cat nodded. “What did he have to do with fairies?”

“He was always talking to them,” Sunny grumbled. “Carrying them around in his mane and tail until most of the hairs fell out.” The cat shuddered. “Crawling with them, he was. Night and day. He even broke my tail, stamping on it to make me drop one. Blasted animal.”

“But... he... but I never saw any fairies on him!” Quint argued. “And I can see fairies, if I choose to. Because I believe in them. I do.”

“Good for you,” Sunny yawned, stretching out a forepaw and unsheathing his claws in a threatening manner.

“This time it’s you that’s lying,” Quint said determinedly. “I’d have noticed, if he’d had fairies on him.” She was utterly certain of this as she spoke, but Sunny’s expression made her falter slightly. He was grinning unabashedly at her now.

“So you admit that you were lying before?” he said cleverly. Quint opened her mouth to respond, but was at a loss for words. The cat’s smile widened further. “Must be in the blood,” he purred softly. “How peculiar.”

“In my blood?” Quint said in horror. “Oh I don’t like blood. Can’t stand the sight of it. Makes me go all faint.”

Sunny sighed. “Not your literal blood, you daft creature,” he told her scathingly.

Quint was confused. “I don’t understand,” she complained to the cat.

“Of course you don’t,” he agreed. “You’re just a horse, and not a very bright one at that. Those fairies don’t stand a chance if all they’ve got around here to protect them is you.” He stood up and stretched, then wandered off across the pasture.

“I can protect them!” Quint yelled fiercely. “Just you watch me! I can do it!”

But Sunny was stalking away through the grass, his bent tail carried low to the ground.

The fairy slid shakily out of Quint’s forelock and fluttered nervously in front of her. “I must go,” she said quickly. “Before he comes back. Thank you for hiding me.”

“I am always here to protect you,” Quint said importantly. “It is my blood.”

“Yes, I think I understand now,” the fairy said softly. “I hadn’t realised that Oliver was your brother.”

“You knew him?” Quint said in astonishment.

“Not personally,” the fairy replied. “But all fairies know about him. We’ve lived on this farm for a long time, but every year there seemed to be more and more cats around endangering our species. We needed a guardian, so we pooled together our magic and created a very powerful diamond. We set it in the meadow and it created a magical fairy ring, inside which we were utterly safe, as no cat could come anywhere near it.”

“There’s a diamond in the pasture?” Quint exclaimed. “Ooh, do show me! I would love to see it!”

“It’s not there anymore,” the fairy explained rather grumpily. “That mother of yours was fool enough to eat it. It gave her rather bad indigestion, too,” she added smugly. “But although we searched for it in vain, it never... er... came out the other end, so to speak. We were in despair until we discovered that she was pregnant, and sure enough, one horribly wet day she produced a golden colt foal with a diamond right on his forehead. You should’ve seen that cat run,” she smirked. “Howled right out of there with its tail between its legs the moment it saw that diamond, and so it should have. Silly creature, calling itself a midwife, insisting on being present at every birth. Honestly, what arrogance. But that’s cats for you.”

Quint was still digesting the fairy’s rather shocking revelation. “Oliver’s diamond came from fairies? No wonder, for it was so perfectly shaped. It would have looked very well on me, don’t you think? I wish I had been born with a fairy diamond on my head! Oliver never deserved such a thing, wretched, grumpy horse that he was.”

“It wasn’t an easy burden for him to carry,” the fairy said softly. “The weight of it came to bear on him in time, and he passed over before he ought to have. We never meant to cause him such strain. But he did us proud, all those years.”

She gazed into the distance, smiling softly.

“What has happened to the diamond now?” Quint asked.

The fairy pointed a tiny finger upwards. “It has gone back to where it came from, of course,” she replied. “It’s the brightest star in the night sky that looks down over this farm.”

“And Oliver?” Quint asked.

“He’s there too,” the fairy replied. “They all are. Every departed soul that has loved this farm watches down over it for eternity. For where else would they be? This place was their heart, their home.”

And with that, the fairy placed a soft kiss on Quint’s velvet nose, and flew speedily away,

swooping and soaring over the grass and disappearing into the woods.

Quint stood quietly and watched her go. A warm breeze blew gently over her, ruffling her mane, and she closed her eyes, remembering absent friends.

“Quint. Quint. QUINT!” Nick’s insistent nudging startled her into wakefulness. “What are you doing?” he asked impatiently. “You’ve been snoozing here all morning!”

And Quint looked around and discovered that he was right. “I must have drifted off,” she said. “Oh Nick, I had the most wonderful dream. That is, it wasn’t a dream. I don’t think. You see, I met a fairy, and she told me—”

“Hmph,” Nick snorted. “You know that I don’t believe in—”

“NO!” Quint cried. “Don’t say it! You mustn’t!”

Nick shook his head in astonishment. “Why on earth— Oh, never mind. No, don’t try to explain it, I really don’t care. Come on, the gate’s been opened.”

So she followed Nick across the pasture and as the remainder of the day passed, Quint’s dream slipped into hazy memory. It wasn’t until late that night, as she settled down to sleep in the dewy grass, that she remembered the fairy’s tale. Gazing upwards at the night sky, she was dazzled by the number of stars looking down over the farm. And sure enough, high above her head, there shone a particularly bright star.

“There you are,” she whispered. “So it was true. I knew it.”

And sinking her head back down, she murmured softly to herself as she drifted off to sleep.

“I do believe in fairies. I do, I do...”



*In loving memory of Road's End Oliver Twist*

# Be Careful What You Wish For...

There was once a little girl who wanted a horse of her own more than anything else in the world. She begged and pleaded with her parents. She promised that she would look after her horse all by herself, swore that she would always brush his mane and tail out properly, that she would get all the mud off his legs and the saddle marks off his back, and always make sure that he had water water water! She promised to always pat her pony and love him up, and she even kept her room mega clean! But it was all to no avail.

“Maybe when you’re older,” her parents always said. And so every year on her birthday, the little girl would ask “Am I old enough yet?” and her parents would reply “Not quite.”

On her tenth birthday, after yet another disappointing morning on which she did not get to unwrap a pony, her great aunt Mildred came to visit. Aunt Mildred was what the family referred to as “eccentric” if they were being polite, or “crazy old Aunt Mildred” if they weren’t. Usually she forgot the girl’s birthday, or she sent a card on the wrong date, for the wrong age... once even entirely in the wrong month! And unlike the little girl’s other aunts, she never sent anything useful like money, only advice. Last year she had received a card with “Happy Birthday, Wake Up and Die Right” written inside it, which the girl thought was a very strange thing to tell a child.

This year, however, Aunt Mildred arrived on the right day, with a card and a package wrapped in brown paper. The little girl opened it and read “Happy Birthday. Be careful what you wish for.”

The little girl unwrapped her gift and found four old worn out crayons. One was black, one was white, one was grey and the other was dark red. She was so disappointed at the gift that she forgot to say Thank You, until her mother gave her a nudge to remind her.

“They don’t look like much, do they?” laughed crazy old Aunt Mildred. “But these are magical crayons. If you use them to draw a picture of your heart’s greatest desire, and make a wish over it at the moment your birthday ends, if you want it badly enough, your wish will come true.”

The little girl was dubious, and for good reason. Who ever heard of magical crayons? But late that night, as she got ready for bed, she saw the crayons on her desk and she wondered. What if they did work? Maybe it was worth a try.

She sat down and got a clean sheet of white paper. The colours no longer seemed drab and silly, they were now the perfect colours to draw her heart’s desire – a pony. She could see the pony in her mind, a beautiful bay gelding with a flowing mane and tail, long straight legs, a pretty face and shining coat. But unfortunately the picture in her mind and the picture on the paper had very little in common. Page after page was screwed up and thrown down in frustration, and as the minutes ticked down to midnight, the little girl was starting to panic.

“This is stupid,” she thought. “Magical crayons indeed.” She threw the crayons down and climbed into bed, switching out the light. But she couldn’t stop thinking about it.

What if they did work, and she was missing the opportunity of a lifetime? She opened her eyes again and looked at her bedside clock. Five minutes to midnight. She scrambled out of bed once more.

“One last try,” she told herself as she sat down at her desk and pulled another piece of paper over to herself. As midnight crept closer, she quickly drew a horse. It looked nothing like the horse of her dreams. The horse in the drawing had long legs, a flat back and a short neck. His head was too large for his body, his eyes were too small for his head, and his tail was scraggly and thin, as she’d run out of space to draw it as thick and luxuriant as she’d have liked. She had coloured his head in dark brown, and his legs black, like the beautiful bay horse in her mind, but time had ticked away and she hadn’t had time to finish colouring him. Instead she gone lightly over the rest of his body with the brown and white crayons, giving a strange speckled effect, although at the finish she’d thrown a few bigger brown spots in for good measure.

As the clock in the hallway downstairs struck midnight, the girl screwed up her eyes and wished fervently, with all her heart, that her wish would come true, and she would have her very own horse.

Nothing happened. And nothing happened. And after a while... nothing happened, and the little girl went to bed very disappointed.

The next morning she awoke to a shriek from her mother, and leaping from her bed, the girl ran downstairs to see what was wrong. She took the stairs two at a time and arrived on the scene to find her mother standing at the back door, pointing at something in the back yard. The girl ducked past her mother to see what was wrong, and stood staring, unable to believe the sight before her.

It was a horse. But it wasn’t just any horse. This horse had long legs, a flat back and a short neck. His head was too large for his body, his eyes were too small for his head, and his tail was scraggly and thin. He had a brown head, black legs and a motley coat with a few brown spots. The girl stared and stared at the horse, who was lazily cropping the grass.

“What on earth is THAT?” her mother cried, having recovered from the shock.

“It’s my horse!” the little girl exclaimed. “He’s just like I drew him last night! Aunt Mildred’s magical crayons actually worked!”

“Well I’ll be,” her mother muttered. “I think we need to get you some art lessons. Why, that’s the strangest looking horse I’ve ever seen!”





The girl was already walking across the lawn towards her new horse. He raised his awkward head and stared at her, a friendly expression in his small eyes, and the girl smiled. "Don't listen to her," she told the horse. "I think you're the most beautiful horse that I've ever seen!"

"You can't possibly keep it," her mother told her, still standing in the doorway. "It can't live in the backyard, there's not enough room. And what would the neighbours say? You'll have to find somewhere else for him to live," she said determinedly.

"Fine," the little girl said, clasping her arms around the horse's scrawny neck. "But I'm not selling him, or giving him away. He's mine now, and mine forever." Her mother shook her head in disbelief, and headed into the house for a strong cup of coffee to revive herself.

The little girl set about brushing her horse, doing her best to make his coat shine, but she only had her own hairbrush and it didn't really work too well. She didn't have a saddle or bridle, so she rode bareback and made a halter out of a length of rope in her garage. Her horse had a bony back, and was very uncomfortable to ride as he wandered down the road, stopping to eat every few strides and refusing to move on without lots of kicking and pulling from his small rider.

"Maybe his trot will be smoother than his walk," the little girl thought, so she squeezed with her heels until he started trotting. But his trot was even more uncomfortable, and she bounced and slipped around on his back as he lurched awkwardly down the road.

"His canter must be smoother than his trot," she decided, so she grabbed onto his mane and pressed him with her outside leg, asking for a transition into canter. But the horse kept trotting. She tried again, but to no avail. She tried kicking him, but he only trotted faster and faster and the girl was in serious danger of falling right off! So she pulled on the rope and brought him back to a walk.

"We just need more practice," she told the horse. "And a saddle and bridle."

They continued down the road and then approached a horse farm. It had rolling green pastures surrounded by white post and rail fences, being grazed by gleaming Thoroughbreds and shining Arabians. The girl felt very self-conscious on her strange looking horse, and decided to keep going past the farm. But her horse was happy to see other equines, and lifting his head, whinnied at the top of his lungs. The horses raised their heads and looked at the strange creature disdainfully. Some of the more highly-strung animals ran away in fright! The little girl's face turned red, but worse was still to come. They reached the driveway for the farm, and her horse turned down it! She pulled and yanked on the rope for all she was worth, kicking him and yelling at him, but to no avail. Her horse simply started trotting down the driveway, leaving her no alternative but to grab his mane and cling on as hard as she could to avoid falling off.

Soon they were in front of a bright red barn, so clean and shiny that it was hard to believe that horses actually lived there. The girl slid off her horse and started trying to pull him away, but he stood still and stubbornly refused to move.

A woman came out of the barn and stared at the sight before her.

“What on earth is that?” she exclaimed in horror. “Get that creature out of here! He is a disgrace.”

“I’m trying,” the girl said. “But he won’t come!” And to her shame, she started to cry. The woman softened and came over to her.

“There there,” she said. “I didn’t mean to yell at you. But where on earth did you get such a horse?”

The little girl was sure that the woman wouldn’t believe the truth, as grown-ups rarely did. “He was... a birthday present from my Aunt Mildred,” she said, which wasn’t really a lie after all.

“You must have a very strange aunt,” the woman said.

The little girl nodded. “I do,” she admitted. “But I’ve always wanted a horse of my own, and he is better than nothing. Only I don’t know what I will do with him, because we only have a small backyard and I can’t keep him there.”

“Certainly not,” the woman agreed. “The neighbours might see him. Well, I do have a spare stable out the back of the farm, where my old horse Lady lives. She’s rather ancient and decrepit, but she was my first horse, so I couldn’t bear to part with her. I know how you feel, you see,” she told the girl. “Horses have always been my dream as well.”

So the woman took the little girl and her horse down to the back of her farm, where an elderly grey mare grazed in a scrubby pasture. The mare was a speckled grey with a sagging back and large, donkey-like ears, but a very sweet expression, and she called out a greeting to the little girl’s horse as he approached.

“This is Lady,” the woman said. “She’s no oil painting, but she’s a kind horse. Let’s introduce them.”

Lady came over to the fence and stretched out her neck to sniff the other horse’s nostrils. “Lady, meet...” the woman hesitated. “What’s your horse’s name?”

The little girl shrugged. “He doesn’t have one yet,” she admitted. “I only got him this morning.”

“Ah. Well you’ll have to think of something. Let me know when you decide.”

The little girl turned her horse out into the pasture and watched him as he ran around happily with his new friend, sniffing her enthusiastically.

“Lady and the Tramp,” the woman said with a smile, but the little girl frowned.

“I can’t call him that!” she exclaimed. “He’s not a tramp.”

“Well he’s hardly a gentleman,” the woman pointed out as the horse bit Lady on the rump and got himself kicked in the chest for his troubles.

“No,” the little girl admitted. “She’s a lady and he’s a... man,” she said. “I’ll call him Manny.”

The woman shrugged. “Suit yourself. Well, you can leave him here to keep Lady company. They’ll be good friends. Just don’t go riding around in public too much, you’ll frighten the living daylights out of everyone.”

So the little girl kept Manny hidden in the small pasture at the back of the beautiful farm, and she loved him dearly. And even after Lady crossed the rainbow bridge, the woman who owned the farm allowed Manny to stay on, as long as he didn’t leave the small, hidden pasture and be seen by anyone. But as the little girl grew older, she became more and more besotted with appearance, and more and more ashamed of her strange looking, awkwardly shaped horse. And when the girl was allowed to ride the farm’s beautiful horses, she quickly forgot about Manny and he was left all alone for a long time.

Years passed, and before she knew it, the little girl had become a young woman heading off to college. She was packing up her room when she came across a picture, crumpled and torn, of a motley coloured horse with long legs, a flat back and a short neck. His head was too large for his body, his eyes too small for his head, and his tail was scraggly and thin. The young woman sat back on her heels and stared at the picture. How long ago it all seemed, and how long since she’d seen her horse. She grabbed her car keys and drove down the road to the farm. Trekking across the pastures, she reached the small, hidden field at the back of the farm, and there he was, grazing in the sunshine. He looked up when he saw her coming, and walked over to the gate to greet her.

“Oh Manny,” the girl said. “I have really neglected you. I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have hidden you away down here all this time. But I am leaving home soon and I mustn’t leave you here any longer. I will find you another home, where people won’t be ashamed of you, and they won’t hide you away. And I’ll find you many more friends to play with, so that you will never be alone and unloved again.”

And after much searching, the girl found a farm at the end of a road where there were horses of all shapes and sizes, grazing and playing in happy harmony, and where the girls who came to ride them were not ashamed of Manny’s awkwardness, but loved him with all of his flaws and strangeness.

And the young woman went off to college and through the rest of her life, she never forgot the wise words of her aunt.

Be careful what you wish for, it might come true!



# How the Unicorn Lost His Horn

Once upon a time, in a beautiful green woodland, there lived a unicorn. He was as pale as moonlight, with a long silver tail, and big dark eyes with a golden horn between them. His name was Diamond Dust, and he was one of the most beautiful and famous unicorns in all the world.

But despite being beautiful and magical, Diamond Dust was unhappy. He was forever being chased by wizards who wanted to pluck his tail hairs to make magic wands, or who called him mean names to make him cry, as unicorn tears are magical and have wonderful healing powers. (The nastiest wound can be healed in an instant by just one unicorn tear, and greedy wizards were desperate to bottle his tears and sell them for exorbitant amounts – getting rich from Diamond Dust’s unhappiness.) “I’m tired of being a unicorn,” Diamond Dust grumbled to himself, but no-one ever heard him, as he was the only unicorn for miles around. He was a very lonely unicorn.

One day, after galloping a long way to escape from two very determined and rather cruel wizards, Diamond Dust reached a small clearing in the woods. In the centre of the clearing was a clear pool of water, and Diamond Dust had just dropped his head to drink from it when he heard a strange sound coming from behind a nearby tree. He trotted quickly over to find a young girl sitting on the ground, with her clothes torn and a tear-streaked face. For a long moment, girl and unicorn gazed at one another in silence, before the unicorn spoke.

“Why are you so sad?” he asked her.

“I’m sad because I fell down and cut my knee, and I’m far from home. It’s getting dark and I’m afraid that I will be lost in the woods,” the girl sobbed.

Diamond Dust was moved by the little girl’s plight, and he nuzzled her gently.

“Don’t cry,” he told her. “I can help you. Let me see your knee.”

Still tearful, the little girl trustingly pulled her skirt out of the way and showed the unicorn a large cut on her left knee. He lowered his head down and carefully cried one single tear onto her wound. It healed immediately, leaving only a tiny silver scar, and the pain was gone instantly. The little girl leapt to her feet and frolicked about the clearing with joy.

“Oh thank you, ever so much!” she cried happily. “How did you do that?”

“I’m magical,” Diamond Dust told her.

“I think you’re just wonderful,” the girl exclaimed, throwing her arms around the unicorn’s neck and hugging him tightly. Now unicorns are so magical and wondrous that all other creatures are jealous of them. Diamond Dust had never had a real friend, and the little girl’s spontaneous hug took him quite by surprise.

“Now I must run my fastest, and hope that I can reach my home before nightfall.”

“Climb onto my back,” Diamond Dust told the girl, still feeling the warmth of her small arms around his silvery neck. “I will carry you home, swifter than the wind and lighter than air.”

And so the girl climbed onto the unicorn’s back and away they went, his smooth strides covering the ground effortlessly, so that the girl was never afraid but laughed aloud with joy. Diamond Dust tossed his beautiful head, and the fading sunlight dappling through the leaves glinted off his golden horn, lighting up the woodlands around them as they traveled.

Before either of them was quite ready for the ride to be over, they were outside the little girl’s house. She slid down from Diamond Dust’s back and gave him a gentle pat on his shoulder. The soft touch of her small hand was a wonderful comfort to the unicorn, so lonely all these many years, and he turned his head and blew softly into her hair.

“Thank you so much,” the girl said. “I will never forget your kindness. I think that you’re the most wonderful creature on earth.”

She turned to leave, and Diamond Dust called out quickly. “Wait!”

The girl turned and the unicorn trotted over to her, leaving shining silver hoofprints in his wake the glinted in the moonlight. Now unicorns are very proud creatures and it is hard for them to admit that they need anything from someone else, especially from a human, and a tiny unimportant one at that. But Diamond Dust didn’t want the girl to leave.

“I may visit you sometime,” he told the girl imperiously. “If I’m not too busy, you know, doing important unicorn things.”

What he really wanted to tell her was “I think you’re the most wonderful creature on earth,” but he was too proud. It hardly mattered, for the little girl was quite overcome with happiness at his words and leapt with joy.

“I would be delighted to see you again! When will you come back? Will it be very soon?”

Diamond Dust thought quickly. It wouldn’t do to seem too eager, he thought. “Next time you feel the wind change, look over your shoulder. I’ll be there.”

“Oh, I will! You are lovely,” the girl smiled. “Might I give you a kiss, please?”

“A kiss?” Diamond Dust was astonished, but not adverse to the idea. “Well, I suppose you might.”

He stood very still as the girl hurried back over to him and kissed his soft pink nose, before turning and dashing inside her house. Diamond Dust was very magical, and his tears and tail hairs were known to be among the most precious things in the entire world. But now Diamond Dust knew that there was something even more special and precious – the unconditional love of a little girl.

The next few days were the longest of Diamond Dust’s life as he impatiently waited for the wind to change, so that he might have an excuse to visit his little friend again. Finally it happened, and he galloped as quickly as he could to see her. She greeted him with a delighted laugh.

“You came back, just as you said you would! Oh how I love you.”

Days turned into weeks, weeks turned into months and months into years, and the unicorn and the girl remained the best of friends. But unicorns don’t age as people do, and as time went by the little girl grew into a bigger girl, and then into a young woman. Diamond Dust still loved her most of all, but as these things tend to happen, his beloved friend met a handsome young man and fell in love with him. He stole her heart away from her unicorn friend, and she married him and moved to a new house on the edge of the woods. Diamond Dust would often stand on the ridge above their home and watch the girl go about her daily life. Every time the wind changed, he would watch to see if she looked over her shoulder for him. Hope would soar in his heart and he would hold his breath, but she was so busy with her chores and her own children, that she never so much as turned her head. It seemed that she had forgotten about him completely, and eventually he wandered away from the woods, feeling lonelier than he ever had before.

Ten long, sad years passed for Diamond Dust, and he lost his zest for life. His coat still shone in the moonlight, but it lost some of its silvery glint. He was slower at running from the wizards, and his heart felt heavy inside him, for he still missed his friend desperately. Eventually he decided that he could stand it no longer, and he must go to see her. It took him a long time to get back to her, but eventually he arrived. He stood on the ridge above her home and watched her, once again, go about her daily chores.

One day, as he stood by the pond in the clearing where they had first met, Diamond Dust felt the wind in the trees change direction, and at the same moment, he heard a sound behind him. He looked over his shoulder and saw his girl approaching. She was now a grown woman, but still every bit as wonderful and precious to him as she had always been, and he whinnied a soft welcome to his dear friend. She rushed toward him and

flung her arms around his soft white neck.

“Oh Diamond Dust, I have neglected you so badly. And just look at the state of you!”

For Diamond Dust had been chased and teased by so many wizards, and had so many of his tail hairs pulled out, that he had now but one single silver strand hanging from his tail, and his dark eyes were swollen almost shut from weeping so often. He nuzzled her neck and she sobbed into his mane.

“Don’t be so sad,” he told her. “I am here now.”

She wiped her tears on his mane and shook her head. “And I am so glad that you are. A terrible thing has happened. My beloved husband has been badly wounded and must have surgery. The doctor says that there is very little hope for him. But I have neglected you so badly that I feel awful asking you for help.”

“Of course I will help you,” the unicorn said kindly. “For anything that makes you so unhappy makes me miserable as well. Climb onto my back and I will take you to your husband’s side.” And so she mounted him once again, and wound her fingers into his silvery mane as they galloped through the woods, fleet and beautiful beyond the telling of it.

He pulled up outside her home and she slid from his soft back.

“Now pluck the hair from my tail,” he instructed her.

“I cannot bear to,” she gasped. “For it is the only one you have left.”

“You must,” he insisted. “Have your doctor stitch your husband’s wound with this hair, and it will help it to heal.”

With tears in her eyes, the woman took hold of the last silvery hair and tugged gently at it, plucking it free.

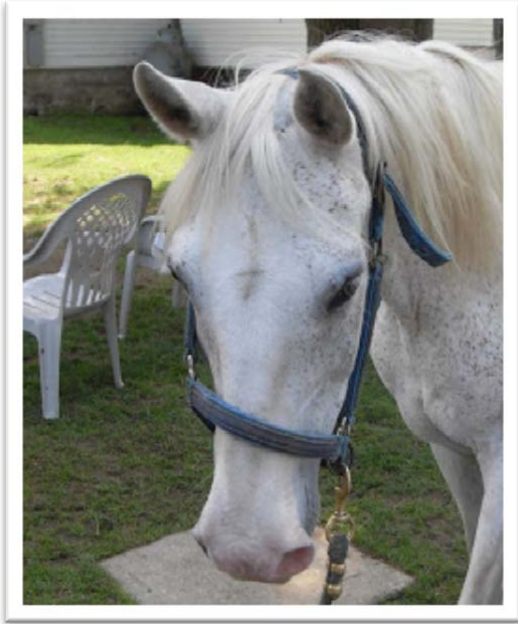
“Now bring me out a small bottle, perhaps made from diamonds or crystal,” he told her.

“But we have nothing like that,” she cried. “We are poor, although we are happy.”

“Then I must go to your husband,” Diamond Dust said, and he walked toward the house. “Bring him to the door, if you can, and I will cry upon his wound.”

“I cannot move him,” she said sadly. “But his bed is by the window, if you can reach through.”





And so she opened the window wide and the unicorn stretched his elegant head into the room. But he knew as soon as he saw her husband's injury that he didn't have enough tears left to heal him. Slowly he withdrew his head and shook his mane sadly.

"My tears will be no use," he said, and she sobbed anew. "But there is one other thing that can help. You must climb onto my back again, and we must hurry if this is to work. Your doctor is right, he doesn't have much time."

Although she was loathe to leave her beloved, the woman trusted the unicorn, and so she climbed upon his back once more and they raced off through the woods. His gait was so smooth that it felt as though they were flying across the ground, and despite her grief, the woman felt like a small child again as she clung to Diamond Dust's mane and wove between the trees.

Eventually they stopped outside a dark castle. Diamond Dust pawed at the ground and whinnied loudly. A gaunt grey wizard appeared in front of them.

"What is this?" he asked, his eyes sparkling greedily at the sight of a unicorn right in front of him.

"I wish to make a deal with you," Diamond Dust explained. "I will give you my horn, which you can make into a potion that will grant wishes. In exchange, I only ask that you allow my friend to make the first wish."

"No!" cried the woman. "I cannot let you do this! Without your horn, you will be..."

"Just a pony," Diamond Dust agreed. "But you will be happy once more, and so it will be worth it."

"It's a deal," the wizard said quickly, before the woman could change her friend's mind, and without further ado he took out his sword and held it at the ready. Diamond Dust lowered his head, never flinching.

"Wait! You cannot do this!" the woman cried. "I will not allow it!" And she leapt between them.



“Get out of the way, stupid woman,” the wizard growled.

“It must be done,” Diamond Dust told her. “If we are to save your beloved. This is guaranteed to work. You must wish for a long, healthy and happy life for you both, and he will be as good as new. You’ll never have to cry again.”

But the woman didn’t move, and the wizard became impatient. “He made the deal,” the wizard complained. “He can’t go back on it now!”

“I have the first wish,” she retorted. “And if you don’t stop and hear me out, I shall never ever wish it and you will have no wishes for yourself either.”

The wizard cursed and lowered his blade. “What do you want?” he demanded.

“Three more wishes,” she said. “That is all.”

“Done,” agreed the wizard, knowing that a horn as large and magical as Diamond Dust’s could make enough potion for hundreds and thousands of his own wishes.

The woman turned to her friend and held his face in her hands. “I love you so much,” she told him. He lifted his soft pink nose and gently kissed her face.

“I love you too,” he said. “I think you are the most wonderful creature on earth.”

And so the wizard raised his sword once more and cut Diamond Dust’s beautiful golden horn clean off his face. Without it he at once looked bedraggled and scruffy, and his once silvery coat turned to a dull white. The flecks of mud that he had showered himself in as he galloped so quickly to the castle seeped into his coat and remained on him. His tail was still gone and his mane was scraggly and worn. He looked a very miserable creature.

The wizard laughed cruelly. “He is Diamond Dust no longer,” he said. “More like coal dust. Look how dirty and bedraggled he has become,” and the pony hung his head in shame.

But his dear friend did not care that he was just a pony, and a shabby looking one at that. She wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him tightly. He nuzzled her neck in response, and they stood together and waited for the wizard to make his potion.

It didn’t take too long. The wizard held out four drops of the potion to the woman, who took one sip.

“I wish for my husband and I to live long, healthy and happy lives,” she said through her tears.

“It is done,” said the pony softly, and the woman smiled. “And now you must save your three other wishes, for you were wise to make that deal. When you do use them, make them count.”

“My dear friend,” the woman said. “I would not think of saving them. They are for you.”

And she lifted the vial and dropped one magical drop onto his back.

“You may never be as beautiful as you once were, having lost your magic,” she said.

“But now that you are a pony, I wish that you are the most beautiful pony I have ever laid eyes on, with a lovely silvery tail and sparkles in your flowing mane, and to have a canter so smooth that it is like floating on a cloud.”

And so before her eyes, the pony’s tail grew long, and his mane shimmered in the light.

“Thank you,” said the pony. “But now you must save your last two wishes for yourself, as you may need them.”

“Oh no,” she insisted. “This next wish is for you too. I wish that you would go to the best possible place for a pony to live, where you will have plenty of dear friends, and always have enough to eat, and that there will be an endless supply of little girls to fall in love with you, and give you kisses, for all the rest of your days.”

And so it was done, and the pony found himself standing in the field at a farm at the end of a road, surrounded by a herd of beautiful welcoming horses. The woman raised her hand and pressed it to his head where his horn had once been.

“Thank you,” the pony said. “But now you must keep that last wish for yourself. I insist.”

But she shook her head. “This wish is for us both,” she explained. “I wish that one day, when all of our days are done, that we will be reunited. And I will be a happy child once more, without a care in the world, and you will be a magical unicorn, cantering across the clouds.”

And a tear fell from the pony’s eye at her words, for he knew now that they would some day be together again. He lifted his nose to her face and she kissed him gently on it.

“Goodbye, my beloved Diamond Dust,” she said softly. He shook his head, and his mane fluttered around him.

“I am Diamond Dust no longer,” he said. “It is as the wizard said and I am just a pony now. But even amongst coal, diamonds may appear, and so I will be known as Coal, hiding my diamond under this less impressive exterior, until that day comes when you and I meet again.”



And with one final kiss, he turned and trotted towards the herd, who were grazing happily next to a pond, and he made himself quite at home.

And so Coal came to live at the farm at the end of the road, where he is loved and looked after as well as can be, and where little girls come during the summertime to give him kisses and canter on his back. For as Coal knows all too well, the most precious thing in the world is the unconditional love of a little girl.

# Summer is on its way!

The snow was finally melting. Green grass poked its head through the disappearing white blanket that had covered the landscape for months. A group of horses stood by the barn, enjoying the feel of the warm sun on their backs and scratching each other's shedding coats.

"Hurray," shouted Alice. "Spring is here!"

Nick snorted. "Silly filly," he muttered. "Spring is nothing to get excited about."

"Why not?" Alice wanted to know. "I like sunshine and green grass and not slipping and sliding all over the place every time I try to go somewhere."

"Spring means summer is on its way," Nick explained moodily.

"Well what's so bad about that?" Alice asked. "I like summer. Sometimes on hot days, I go swimming in the pond."

"I like summer too," Quint said dreamily. "The flowers are so pretty."

"Summertime means work," Nick explained.

"I'm with Nick," Toby grumbled. "Summer means that people come and want to ride you, and they put a bridle on you even though you have a condition that really means you should be exempt. It's debilitating," he added, turning his head towards them to best display his ear fungus.

"I concur," Ubi concurred.

"Don't be such a baby," Ramona snapped. "You're not the only one with sore ears but you're the only one who goes on and on about it all the time."

"Well let's give it to you and see how you like it," Toby replied angrily.

Nick flattened his ears at both of them and told them to shut up.

"We get to go on trail rides," Alice continued, now that peace was restored.

Nirvana rolled her eyes. "Yeah, great fun those are. I do not understand why we have to go to the overlooks every single day. You'd think they'd be tired of the view by now."

“And if I have to hear the Moose Song one more time, I’m going to go crazy,” Minstrel added. “I only need to hear one line, and it’s stuck in my head for days.”

“There was a great big moose,” X-Caliber started singing, but Minstrel sent a swinging kick his way that soon shut him up.

“I like trails,” Orsha said. “It’s good when you have a very tiny camper, because when you stop for a snack, they can’t make you go on. You can get in a good few mouthfuls before the counsellor catches up to you.”

“Ugh, counsellors,” Windstar grumbled. “They think they know everything, and they’re so bossy. Always throwing their weight around and ‘supervising’ me. I’m having to be really sneaky these days if I want to bite a camper.”

“Hmph,” Gayle interjected. “Stop whining. Those counsellors aren’t so bad if you train a bit of respect into them. All I have to do is walk up to the gate and they all start yelling my name and scattering.”

“Some of them do that for me too,” X-Caliber bragged.

“That’s not respect,” Gayle snapped back. “It’s disgust.”

X-Caliber snorted and moved away with his tail held high, pretending not to care about Gayle’s opinion of him.



“I don’t know what you guys are all complaining about,” said Ides. “At least you get to go on trail. I just do ring lesson after ring lesson. And frankly, after the third time around the ring, I start getting bored.”

“Don’t be so well behaved then,” Toby told her. “If you do as you’re told all the time, you have to expect to be exploited. Play up a bit, keep them on their toes.”

“On their toes,” Ubi agreed.

“Just stop and refuse to go on, and eventually they give up. A little stubbornness goes a long way,” Toby told Alice.

“A long way,” Ubi repeated.

“Oh, I figured out that ring problem ages ago,” Alice said self-importantly. “I was watching Cyndi and I worked it out. They make you do a certain number of circles, then you can finish, so the faster you go, the sooner your time is up.”

“I prefer the alternative method,” Bill mumbled from the sideline where he was standing with Fred, quietly eavesdropping. “Just go really slowly and after a while they get tired of kicking you and you can go stand in the middle of the ring and eat grass.”

“Quite right,” Toby agreed. “You must be sure that your rider does at least as much work as you do. It’s very important to exercise your rider.”

“Very important,” echoed his brother.

“One of these days,” Claire muttered to no-one in particular, “Ubi is going to have an original thought, and we will all die of shock.”

“Shut up Claire,” Toby grumped.

“Yeah, shut up,” Ubi said.

Claire just snorted, having proven her point, and went back to scratching her head on a post.

Alice wandered off then, wondering whether she really was the only one to be excited about the summertime. The pony pack were just down the hill, and Alice trotted over to see what they thought about campers.

“Campers bring peppermints,” Scooter said dreamily. “I like peppermints.”

Nonny shook his head. “I’d rather eat a camper than a peppermint. I’m considering becoming a carnivore. That way I’ll be at the top of the food chain.”

“I have no problem with campers,” Baby said brusquely. “They leave me well enough alone except to feed me, and I’m good with that.”

Alice looked at Nelson, who gazed idly back at her. “I like trail,” he said. “It’s nice to get out of the pasture every now and then. I do get tired by the end of the summer though.”

Alice trotted over to Bittersweet, Sweetpea, Major and Jack who were standing near the pond, basking in the sun. Jack flattened his ears at Alice’s approach.

“Go away,” he growled.

“I just wanted to ask you a question,” Alice said, slowing to a walk.

“You and your questions,” Major said. “You must be the most inquisitive pony to ever live. You’re worse than Dante, and I never thought that was possible.”

“I just like to know stuff,” Alice replied, her feelings a little hurt.

“What’s your question?” Bittersweet asked sweetly.

“Are you looking forward to camp this summer?”

Bittersweet looked thoughtful for a moment. “Sure. I like going on trail rides and being fussed over.”

“You just like wearing all that pink tack,” Major teased her gently.

“So what if I do?” Bittersweet replied, a little defensively. “I look pretty in pink.”

“Indeed you do,” Major agreed.

“I’m not complaining. I’m just glad it’s not me that has... er, gets to wear it.”

Jack snorted. “Me too. I’d die of shame if I had to wear pink.”

“Well you’re a boy,” Alice told him. “Boys don’t wear pink. Sometimes I do,” she added.



Bittersweet looked at her sharply. “What do you mean? What pink tack do you have?”

Alice was about to explain that she borrowed Bittersweet’s, when she recognised Bitters’ expression from that time on trail when she’d gotten too close behind her and been left with the outline of Bitters’ hoof on her chest. “Um, well, none I guess.”

Bittersweet glared at her a moment longer, then turned away. “You can go now,” she muttered bitterly.

“Okay,” Alice said, figuring that Sweetpea wouldn’t have anything constructive to add anyway. As she wandered off, she heard Sweetpea mumbling something to Jack, and flicked an ear back to listen.



“What did she say? Am I looking for wood to carve this summer?”

Alice was so busy rolling her eyes that she almost walked right into Cassidy, who looked nervous.

“Sorry,” Alice apologised. “Hey Cassidy, do you like it when the campers come?”

“Well, I could do without the riding part sometimes,” she mused. “I do get tired. But the girls are sweet and I like all of the attention, and the grooming, and the kisses.” And she smiled to herself as Alice wandered off in search of her own friends.

Vanessa, Essie and Almo were under the barn, bragging to one another about their right to be there and deluding themselves that they could defend the space if Nick or Toby or one of those "high horses" thought they could push them out. Alice came dashing around the corner and Almo leapt in fright, spinning around quickly and assuming a submissive pose.

"Wimp," Essie muttered.

"Hi guys!" Alice greeted them. "I've been going around asking everyone if they're looking forward to summer."

"That's nice," Vanessa said, not really caring.

"Everyone had very different opinions," Alice went on. "It was fascinating really. Nonny wants to just bite kids but Scooter likes peppermints, and Bittersweet got mad at me and Toby was explaining how to exercise campers, and..."

"I know that one already," Almo snapped. "You perform a series of gymnastic moves to see if you can dislodge them. Gotta teach them to sit tight."

"You talk the talk," Vanessa replied. "But you don't really walk the walk. You played up ONCE last summer."

"Twice!" Almo defended himself, and Vanessa rolled her eyes.

"Big deal."

"Well I don't see you playing the rebel either," Almo replied.



"Because I'm not that stupid," Vanessa countered. "If you behave like that, they give you all the bossy riders. Better off behaving well and getting nice quiet riders that don't make life so difficult."

"See? Fascinating," Alice nodded. Just as she was about to continue listing everyone else's opinions, Gayle and Claire arrived to claim their spot under the barn, and the baby Morgans scattered quickly, telling each other that they were bored of being under the barn anyway and they would quite like to soak up some sun.

So as the sun baked down and melted the winter away, the horses and ponies at the farm at the end of the road found themselves dreaming of their favourite campers, of their happy voices and smiling faces, and while some were plotting how to get out of as much work as possible, and others planned how to outwit the counsellors... truth be told, every animal on the farm, deep down, was looking forward to camp.

