

## The Pursuit of Happiness

by Rosalyn Hurst

Lena woke up with a feeling of dread that traditionally started in the pit of her stomach, and gradually moved around her body. She recognised the symptoms, not death, but strain and to be frank, panic.

She forced herself to calm down and went through the check list: mares and foals in the top paddock, old Lucy and her foal in the top stable; barn ready, the ponies in for the night, tack room cleaned out; hand sanitisers everywhere, and that stallion now in the bottom box.

Why had she agreed to this day? The business of running a stud that bred Highland ponies, took up most of her waking hours. Her ponies were popular among wanna-be-live in-the-country families, one that everyone could ride, cheap to keep and had the snob value that the Queen had several.

Lena had been approached to lend ponies for the Riding for the Disabled and some of older ponies were ideal. Every two weeks she loaded up reliable mares which had broad backs and long manes to hang onto. At the Centre children with different disabilities were gathered to be mounted up, supported by a leader and two helpers on each side in case the child tipped off.

A month ago Amy, a 13 year old moved her wheel chair quietly up and said,

“Doesn’t it make you sick?”

“What?” Lena said.

“All this crap, all these do-gooders.”

Lena had never been good with words.

“Come on, I know you’re not one of them, I’m surrounded by them.”

“Them?”

“Those volunteers, only here because it makes them feel good, totally wrapped up in themselves, forcing us to be happy, no choice for us, just look.”

Lena had looked around. Some of the kids were obviously having fun, but others less so as they wobbled precariously, or seemed in physical discomfort. The cry of, “Oh Chloe, isn’t this fun?” Or, “Gary you are doing so well, aren’t you pleased?” And yet neither Chloe nor Gary looked as if they were having the time of their lives.

The first volunteers arrived at 10 o’clock and officiously checked everything was in place. All well except Storm, the newly acquired stallion, which was objecting to being in a stable, and lashed out at the door and even tried to bite a passing volunteer. Lena was ordered to put a barrier around his stable and lock the top door. An hour later the minibuses arrived and with effort the children helped out, only two in wheelchairs, other gamely making their way with walking aids. Amy came down fast in her motorised wheelchair, keeping away from the main group,

It could have been a great morning, but rain clouds threatened, a cold wind made the mares skittish so they would not come up the field though enticed with carrots and apples. The old mares leaned over the stable door, happy to get the extra rations and a pat from the most exuberant children, though several looked around the stable yard with apprehension as crashing and kicking could be heard.

Amy came up to Lena, and asked quite bluntly what the racket was all about.

“Its Storm the stallion, he doesn’t like being locked up. Don’t worry I’ll let him out later.”

And Lena, then distracted helped move the children into the warmth of the barn for snack and drinks. And all was well until someone said,

‘We’re a child short.’

‘Oh dear god no!!’ Lena raced outside, she knew where to look, Storm’s top stable door open wheelchair, two feet sticking out and the stallion just standing there. She approached quietly. Amy turned laughing.

“I managed to get out and stand on the chair and open the door and then I slipped and Storm held me up. See he’s happy now.”

Sure enough, Storm was standing there like old Dobbin with Amy clinging onto his mane.

“Now that’s been the very best day,” said Amy later, with a last pat to Storm and even a hug for Lena, who was planning an immediate large dose of gin and tonic after the bus departure.

Two weeks later at the Centre a volunteer told Lena that Amy had died clinging to her picture of Storm, and Lena who had previously entertained plans to turn Storm into dog meat, relented and sent him back to the highlands of Scotland to chase around on the wild mountain sides.