

Sally had always wanted a pony. Ever since she was five she had worshipped horses. It's a stage most girls go through but Sally never came out of it. Every birthday, every christmas Sally asked for a horse. "Please Santa, all I've ever really wanted was a pony." But she never got one. Oh she got all the My Little Pony and Beanie Baby horses she could ever want, but they didn't live up to the real thing. "Please daddy, oh please can I get a horse? It can sleep in my room." Her dad would always laugh and point out that a horse wouldn't even be able to fit through her doorway. But she was persistent. Finally for her eleventh birthday her dad gave in.

"Sally, now understand this is not an actual horse."

Sally just nodded, she was going to get to ride a horse for the first time ever! The present was riding lessons, once a week for twelve weeks. For twelve whole weeks she would get a horse for her very own. "Oh, thank you daddy!" And her dad would just smile and rub her head.

The first day she got to ride a horse, she was so nervous. The half hour it took for her dad to drive her out to the stables was the longest of her life. What would the horse be like? Would it be a Waler or a Heavy Trotter, maybe it would be a Painted horse. There were so many breeds! She practically jumped out of the car when they finally pulled up to the stables.

There was more waiting as her father checked her in and signed some paperwork. Finally Sally was allowed to go out at look at the horses. The stables were full, they smelled like the rancid smell of dirt, not completely unpleasant but not something Sally would have wanted in a perfume. The horses were enormous, there were ponies and donkeys and massive stallions. Each horse had a little sign which said it's name and type. Here was an American Shetland named honey, there was a Spanish mustang named Norm. Every one was beautiful. Sally wandered back and forth between the stables admiring each horse in turn. Every so often one would see her approach and move towards the door but Sally was too shy to touch them.

After many minutes of admiring the horses, Sally heard the heavy clomping of a horse behind her. She turned and found herself face to nose with the biggest

mare she had ever seen. The horse stood fourteen hands tall, it's hair jet black, and Sally could see the fire in it's eyes. She stumbled back a couple of steps.

"Sally Freeman?"

She had been so intent on the horse that she hadn't noticed the rider. The woman was perched atop the horse as if it were a palanquin, her shiny black hair tucked naturally in a ponytail under her riding cap. Covered in dirt and sweat, the woman had the air about her as if she were a queen—in complete control of everything around her, including the horse.

Sally nodded tentatively and the woman kept down from the horse.

"My name's Melinda and this is Buttercup. She'll be teaching you how to ride." Sally stared at the horse. Without her rider, Buttercup seemed to have doubled in size. She bared her teeth and Sally shied away, they were bigger than kitchen knives.

"First lesson: don't be afraid of the horse," Melinda said reaching into her pocket and pulled out an apple. She offered it to Buttercup and the horse bit clean through it. "Buttercup's one of the nicest horses you'll meet once you get to know her. She just likes her sweets."

Sally stared from horse to rider and decided she'd just have to take her at her word.

"Alright, I think it's time to get started," Melinda said and with one swift motion she hoisted Sally up into the saddle, before the girl had time to protest.

"But... but don't I need a helmet or training or something?"

Melinda laughed, "Maybe when we start trotting, but for now we'll just be walking around the paddock."

Melinda grabbed Buttercup's reins and lead the horse out towards the fenced paddock. It was all Sally could do to stay on. This was nothing like she had imagined. The smooth almost flight-like sensation of her imagination was replaced with the very real bumping of every step the horse took. It was a matter of minutes before Sally realized she would probably be bruised and unable to sit for days. Melinda lead them through the gate and began circling the pasture. Every so often she would shout advice to Sally.

“Keep your knees tucked. You don’t want them to catch on anything.”

“Lean forward, she needs to feel your weight.”

Slowly Sally was able to ignore the pain of each step, and began to enjoy the sensation of moving with the horse.

“There you’re getting it,” Melinda said with a smile. Sally began to relax. It was scary having such a big creature under you. She knew that if she wanted, Buttercup could throw Sally to the ground and nothing Melinda said or did could stop the beast. But Melinda was right, Buttercup did seem docile, even friendly. The way the horse moved under her, slowly, as if she had been teaching new riders all her life. Sally thought that if Melinda dropped the reins, the mare would continue plodding around the corral until someone told her to stop.

“There’s the smile I was hoping for,” Melinda said and Sally was surprised to find herself grinning.

“It’s not that hard,” the girl said with a little laugh.

“Well are you ready to go harder?” And without waiting for an answer Melinda dropped the reins and smacked the horse on the rear.

Buttercup skipped the trot and went straight into a canter. Sally screamed and clutched tight to the saddle. She could barely see over the horse’s head as they careened wildly. “Lean forward,” Melinda shouted and Sally tried. And then she saw where they were headed. There was a jump in front of them. Not a very big one, but enough that the horse would definitely leave the ground.

Sally shut her eyes.

And then there was a swooping sensation as she was airborne. Her eye popped open on their own accord, she was flying. She was really, really flying!

And then the horse hit the ground and Sally fell back into the saddle. Bam, the bruise got bigger. They were still moving fast. Sally, barely able to hold on through the jump, lost her grip and tumbled over the side. She saw the ground rush up at her and heard the thump as the horse continued on without her.

She lay there for a while, breathing in the freshly turned dirt. She heard a whistle as Melinda hailed the horse. And then a hand grabbed her by the shoulder and turned her over.

May 13th, 2014

“Doing alright, pipsqueak?” Melinda asked, staring down at the girl.
Sally smiled, “Can I go again?”