

**Our Actions Have Impact
(or, The Midnight Ride of the Twins)**

One week, peas are in and peanut butter sandwiches are out. Two days later, the little green legumes are as appealing as a suit and tie on a steamy August day and the gourmet du jour is applesauce. This month, a firefighter; next, a doctor; last year it was a magician. Yup, if there's one thing kids are known for, it's for changing their minds. Preferences and favorites are slipped on and shed as easily and often as pajamas. The options are endless; reason and rationale have little purchase on the slope of possibilities.

What's your favorite flavor of ice cream? What do you want to be when you grow up? Who is your favorite author? No doubt but that my responses to these and hundreds of other queries switched and flip-flopped, reversed and repealed, just like any kid's. With one huge, unvarying, unwavering exception: from the time I could speak the word until T graduated from college, there was one answer that never changed, although the phrasing of the question might. The answer: "a pony." What would you like for your birthday? A pony. What do you hope you'll find under the Christmas tree? A pony. Why do you wish on a falling star? toss a coin in a fountain? pull for the fat side of the wishbone? A pony! A pony! A pony!

Oh sure, maybe the pony of my dreams was a bit fickle: inky black with a big red bow about his neck one day, copper-penny chestnut or a smoky gray with dapples as big as apples and a silvery mane the next. But hey, I would have taken any pony—pinto, palomino, buckskin, bay. (As I grew taller, so did the pony. Okay, by the time I was in high school, the pony of my fancy was no longer a roly-polly Shetland, but a near-black Hanovarian with seal points and a small white star, but I still would have been delighted with any horse at all.)

I dreamt about ponies; drew, painted and read about them. I knew where every equine lived between my house and any given destination. Four minutes out of Richmond, on the left side of the road, just after the sharp curve with the "thank you ma'am" bump in the road? An appaloosa. Eleven minutes from town, beyond the big hay field but before the general store, behind the white house with the black shutters? A big blue roan and a Roman-nosed dun with a reached mane and a red nylon halter.

Hour after hour, my twin sister Martha and I would pretend we were horses, galloping around the field and clearing jumps we set up in the yard; we trotted and pranced, bucked and reared. Scraps of fabrics were fashioned into rosettes and ribbons for the horse shows we held. We were the spectators, riders, horses, and judges. After the shows, "Butterball," a 50-gallon drum strung horizontally between two trees, was groomed and bathed regularly and taken for a hack.

The die was cast when once, on the weekly trip to get groceries in a nearby town, my mother stopped at a rambling old New England farmhouse with overgrown fields. Two trips 'round a meadow on "Dorea," a pudgy little black and white pony with a shaggy mane and tail, sealed it; there was no going back—I was hooked. Any chance of my ever changing "the answer" vanished quicker than a drop of water on a fiery skillet.

Although an equestrian childhood was not within my family's means, now and again an opportunity for a pony ride came along, and my passion was indulged (and further fueled). Every spare penny and any gift-dollar were immediately earmarked toward the future possibility of sitting in the saddle. And when Mart and I got to take actual riding *lessons* through a camp program, I was in heaven! Posting trot! Cavaletti! A velvet muzzle, the creak of old leather, the smells of hay and fresh manure, a soft nicker. Pure joy, unalloyed bliss! Even my fantasies hadn't been this idyllic!

In one of the greater mysteries of life, when Mart and I were around twelve years old, we convinced (wore down? cajoled? duped?) my mom and dad to take a huge leap of faith (idiocy?) and let us rent a couple of horses for several weeks during the summer. My parents were as comfortable around and knew as much about large, hoofed mammals as they did about poisonous snakes, but through some still-puzzling turn of events, "Duke" and "Chief" arrived at our summer place in New Hampshire one glorious day. Most likely they were spavin-legged, swaybacked, and unthrifty, but in our eyes, they were magnificent steeds, noble beasts.

Fulfilling our end of the bargain, Martha and I hauled every water bucket from the lake to the large paddock we had fenced off for them. Several hundred yards separated the two, and photos from the time show two

little girls pretzled from the weight of the jumbo pails, but I don't think we ever noticed the burden. Hay bales, grain bags, oversized saddles—nothing was too much for us in those glorious days! We didn't expect, nor did we ask for (or want!), any help taking care of "our" horses.

After tending to the morning chores, we twins gulped down our own breakfasts, then mounted up and headed out as soon as we could. The dirt roads around the lake and webbing the area were perfect for our twice-or thrice-daily rides. We explored old jeep tracks and abandoned farm paths; rode "uptown" to the general store and post office; cantered through hay fields (the woodchuck holes a constant threat) and raspberry patches. We were Annie Oakley and Willie Shoemaker, Roy Rogers and Michael Plumb; cowgirls and dressage queens, jumpers and jockeys. Most of all, we were happy beyond words, living out our dreams.

If the percussion of pounding hooves didn't announce our coming down the road, then certainly the ringing of our laughter did. Folks along the lake were generous in their gladness for us, and hearty waves hailed us from porches; "good-afternoons" bellowed from picnic tables; and the occasional driver slowed to a crawl to give us wide berth and wider smile.

During this summer that Mart and I trotted through, my folks had to go away for a couple of nights, leaving the two of us by ourselves . . . or so we fancied ourselves to be, anyway. Two cottages of aunts and uncles were only a short, well-worn path away, and it was just a minute's pad from our doorstep to our grandmother's. But we were young and probably conjured up visions of ourselves as independent and adult.

As it happened, a glorious foil moon owned one of these evenings—she filled the sky with her shimmering light, her resplendent rays dancing off the inky firmament and casting silhouette shadows to decorate the ground. The Sirens' song couldn't have

tempted us to a greater degree: we just *had* to out for a midnight ride! And so we did!

Once the idea was voiced, in the split of an instant it became deed. No need for tiptoeing, we sprang out of our comfy beds and headed out the door. My guess is that we probably clipped a couple of lead ropes to the horses' halters and rode out bareback, not bothering with bridles and saddles (as we were wont to do). Our sense of freedom and wonder was as vast as the heavens we loped beneath. What a thrill! Peals of mirth born from our glee and elation rang through the night, bounced off the hills. This was jubilation unfettered.

Bear in mind, Mart and I had been well-schooled in lake etiquette and knew fully, from an early age, that lakes hold no secrets. On days when the surface is glass-smooth, what passes as a whisper on dry land is magnified to a shout over water; ordinary household sounds (clanking dinnerware, scraping of chairs) and conversations become distinctly (and disconcertingly) clear. At night, the effect is amplified exponentially. This fact was as part of our everyday lives as was the robins' greeting of the mornings.

So how in the world the two of us ever thought we could "get away with" our late-hour escapade, I have no idea. Perhaps we never framed our actions into "should" or "shouldn't" and acted solely out of childhood innocence and eagerness. Anyway, the clip-pity-clop of Chief and Jake and our giggles and shouts echoed up and down the lake, shattering the silence. The dirt road was a perfect drum for the hoofbeats, the melody for our merriment; our cachinnations were the harmony. For better or for worse, the entire lake heard our concert. And when my folks returned? To sum things up, to say they weren't as delighted with the adventure as we were would be comparable to opining that pushing a lawnmower across a Kansas field would be a bit tiring.

And what was the lesson learned? Forgive me, Mom and Dad, but it was that galloping by moonlight on a crystal summer night—feeling the horse's muscles beneath me, the

wind in my face, and an abandonment of all the ordinary—was beyond compare.

Kidding aside, a lasting impression was made on me: that even if our actions don't have tangible results, they do have consequences. Although the hoofprints stamped in the road's dust were quickly wiped away by wind or passing cars, the reverberations of the footfalls made a longer, lasting mark. To think we can tiptoe through life and not be noticed is a bit of a naive or sheltered viewpoint.

And just a note: my thirst for a horse was slaked two hours after I finished my final college exam: I ran (literally) from the classroom to the bank to a horse dealer and bought a horse, the "pony" of my dreams!