

The Winged Horse

THE FIRST TO ARRIVE WAS A HORSE. I was gazing out the kitchen window in a dishwashing reverie one morning when a tiny mare, half the size of a regular horse, pranced into view. Pure white, with a long white mane and tail, she looked like a unicorn, minus the horn. I watched in wonderment as she tossed her head and danced away. Was she really there?

I got outside in time to see her trot up to the gate over which the two full-size horses who lived on the property were craning their necks, eyes wide at the sight of her. The visitor touched noses with the gray gelding. The chestnut mare next to him promptly bit the little one on the head. The white horse squealed and leapt back but wasn't truly perturbed. She was overflowing with the ecstasy of freedom.

I moved forward and she walked to meet me, nosed my outstretched hand, and gazed at me from jet-black eyes rimmed endearingly with long white eyelashes. The top of her head reached no higher than my chest. Later I learned that she is a miniature horse, which is bred differently from a pony. After greeting me, the little horse danced off again, back to the gate, where she got in another touch on the gelding's nose before ducking away from the mare's reach. Gabriel, the wild desert donkey, approached tentatively to



see what the commotion was about. He was at the bottom of the herd's hierarchy (the mare was at the top), which meant he couldn't push into the others' space, so he hung back, but his eyes were riveted on the new arrival.

I watched the little white mare tossing her head and prancing before them. She held herself as if she had no weight, like a dancer does, which in equestrian circles is called "collection." The ability to do this is a regal trait of horses and it is thrilling to see. When horses are collected, they seem to float, their feet hardly touching the ground. They are complete grace and utterly, fully present.

How had this little horse gotten onto the property? The eight acres were fenced. But rather than question the marvelous gift, I went to fill a bucket of water for her.

That afternoon, a teenage girl came looking for the horse, who it turned out had broken her tether a few houses away. The little mare raised her head to look at the girl, but lowered it again to the bounty of the grass. We stood watching her graze and speculated about how she had ended up here. We concluded that someone must have come across her on the road, seen the sign on my driveway gate requesting those who entered to close the gate after them because horses were loose on the property, and figured this was where she belonged. Rural Sonoma County, where I live, still operates in the old farm way: passersby take responsibility if they see a cow, horse, sheep, goat, or pig loose and take the time to herd the animal to safety.

The little mare must have slipped her halter to get free of the tether because she was wearing no sign of ownership or bondage—a fairy horse, entirely her own being. That's the vision of her I still carry, and my memory blurs when I recall the girl putting a rope around the little one's neck and leading her away. With the deep connection I have to this

horse now, I can't believe I let the girl take her with no discussion of other options, knowing she would end up back on a tether, with no horse companions. Horses are herd animals and they pine in loneliness when they are forced to live without other horses. I knew all this and I loved animals dearly, but at that time my heart would open only so far; my mind could still persuade me not to follow my heart's promptings. "Adopting a horse would tie you down," my mind told me. "You already have a cat and that's enough of a commitment. Better just to enjoy other people's animals." So I let the little white horse be led away.

I didn't think I would see her again. But one morning a few weeks later, when I sat down at my computer to write and looked out over the expanse of summer-golden grass that stretched from the windows before me to the neighboring field, there she was. Tethered in the field beyond the fence line, with about fifteen feet of rope tied to a stake, she could only go endlessly round in a circle. Tethering is a terrible thing to do to any animal. It alters their minds to have their world limited to what they can reach at the end of a rope, just as it would the mind of a human kept that way.

The horse was out there all day, and the next day too. On the third morning, I saw that she had knocked over her water bucket. As the day wore on, nobody came to refill it. I could stand it no longer. The girl had told me where she lived, and I walked down the street to talk to her and her mother. After the usual neighborly exchange of who has lived where and for how long, I broached the subject of the little horse, asking if they were looking for a good home for her, gently suggesting that she might be happier where she could roam free and be with other horses. The mother said they actually would like to find a new home for her, that they had thought they could set up a fence—she knew what

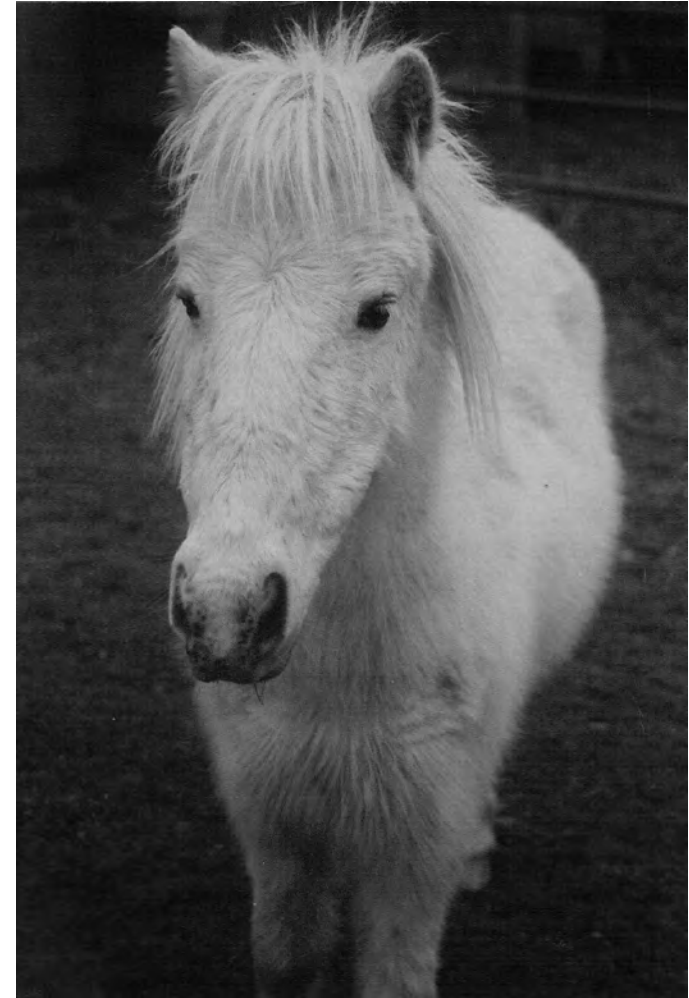


horses needed (there was a touch of guilt in this and a need to explain that she was aware the tether was a bad idea)—but they only rented the place and had had work setbacks recently, so they couldn't afford it. When I asked where the horse had come from, the woman said that a guy who owed her husband money for work he had done for him hadn't been able to pay and had given the horse in lieu of payment.

Before I knew it, I was walking the horse out to the road and heading for home. Looking down at her, I couldn't stop smiling at the thought that I would be seeing this magical creature every day. She went willingly with me, stepping along patiently at my side on her pearly hooves. I assumed she was used to being led where humans chose to take her. Now, looking back, I think she knew there was a grander plan. At the time, I thought I was merely rescuing a horse. She knew better.

As soon as we were inside the driveway gate, I took off her halter and stood back. She gazed at me for a moment with those beautiful black eyes, then flew up the gravel drive, heading for the herd. My heart lifted at the sight of her set free. Her true name came to me then: Pegasus. Her old name didn't make it past the gate.

Pegasus's new home was eight acres of pasture and brush. I rented the house on the property, worked at home as a writer and editor, and took care of the owner's two horses and donkey. A "no-climb" fence, a sturdy wire-mesh and wood-post construction designed for the safety of livestock, ran around the perimeter of the property and sectioned off three pastures, with gates to separate animals as needed. I closed the gate between the new arrival and the others for a few days until I was sure the large horses wouldn't hurt her. I wasn't worried about Gabriel. It was clear from their exchanges through the fence that they were already friends.



Pegasus

I hadn't planned on being the guardian of large animals. I'd come into the role after a long process of settling down that had begun for me eight years before when I left the city for the country. I had lived in one city or another, mostly

