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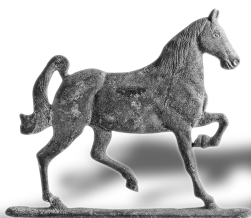
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A rare streak of sunlight poked through the barn slats and made the new black filly glow. Tiny frost clouds puffed from her nostrils as she stared, wide-eyed, at me across the stall.

I held out the bottle of goat's milk to her. "Come on. I'm not going to hurt you," I pleaded.

But the orphan foal ducked behind my horse Nickers and stood alert, her long, knobby-kneed legs stretched, giraffe-style.

I gave up and rested my head against my white Arabian's neck. "We've got to get that foal to trust me, Nickers," I whispered. I breathed in her horsey warmth and could have fallen asleep right there.

Since the birth of the foal on Christmas Eve, I'd spent three nights and three days in the barn,

making sure she got the bottled colostrum, or first milk, she needed to survive. Now I wanted to get her used to goat's milk, the next best thing to mare's milk. Annie Goat was on loan to me from Granny Barker. As soon as the filly stopped being so scared of me, I planned to train her to nurse from the goat.

Annie was in no hurry to take on the foal. Ignoring us, she stood at the opposite end of the stall, munching hay. She looked like an old man chewing tobacco. I'd been bringing her into the stall with Nickers and the foal, hoping they'd all get used to each other. I needed the foal to nurse from Annie Goat.

Nickers licked the filly's neck and jaw. It made me proud, seeing the way my horse had adopted this scraggly orphan. The foal was born with four white stockings, a blaze on her forehead, and a black coat that was bushy and curly. She was beautiful but fragile. It was going to take everything I had to keep her healthy.

I stood on tiptoes to peek over Nickers at the foal.

The filly bolted as if I'd attacked her. She bumped the wall and nearly toppled over.

I stepped back to the stall door. "It's okay, girl. I'll stay away. I know how you feel."

She'd lost her mother, and the world didn't look friendly to her. I did know how the orphan felt. It had been two years since I'd lost *my* mom, and I still had trouble trusting humans.

I was born in Wyoming and had a pretty perfect life for my first ten years. My mom was the best horse gentler in the county, the state, maybe even the world. Everything I know about horses I learned from her. When she died, Dad moved my sister, Lizzy, and me from place to place until we ended up in Ashland, Ohio.

Things were working out, though. I think Mom would have been proud of me. I'd already become known as Winnie the Horse Gentler. And even though I'm only in seventh grade, people bring me their problem horses and actually pay me to gentle them.

That's kind of how I ended up with the foal's mother in my barn.

I glanced into the next stall and felt the tears press against my eyeballs as I remembered Gracie there. The dapple-gray mare had just shown up in my pasture one morning, an

anonymous problem-horse gift for Winnie the Horse Gentler. I'd dubbed her "Amazing Grace."

But Gracie's only *problem* had been neglect. It had been a miracle that, sick as Gracie was, she held on until she delivered her foal.

My mind flashed me a photo of the old gray mare, lying in the hay, craning her neck to see her newborn foal. I have a photographic memory, so the details were all there—Gracie's big eyes glazed, the foal slick from birth, steam rising from the bed of hay.

Sometimes having a photographic memory isn't so great. Without my permission, my brain snaps pictures that etch their way deep into my mind forever, then pop up when I'd least like to see them. My brain has stored 100 photos of the accident that killed my mother. And now I have snapshots of Gracie dying too.

I shut my eyes, but the picture grew even sharper. Gracie died in my arms.

"Winnie? You okay?" Lizzy came up behind me. She didn't have a coat on, even though the temperature was below freezing.

"I still can't get the filly to trust me, Lizzy. I don't know what I'm doing wrong."

Mom used to say that the first 48 hours could

determine how well a foal got along with humans for the rest of its life. I'd passed the 48-hour mark and still couldn't get close to this filly.

"I'm sure you're not doing anything wrong. That little horse will come around!" Lizzy said, looking like a cheerleader. My sister is a year younger than me, but she's two inches taller. We both caught Mom's dark hair and lean build, but Lizzy dodged the freckles. "Just give her time. She'll see what a terrific friend Winnie Willis can be!"

Lizzy seemed to be glancing around the barn for something. "Geri hasn't come by, has she?" she asked, picking up Churchill, a giant gray cat that belongs to our friend Catman Coolidge. The cat rubbed his smushed-in, flat face against Lizzy's neck.

"Geri? Nope."

Geri is Lizzy's best friend. My sister loves all things lizard, and Geri is a frog nut. Sometimes I admit I'm a little jealous at how easily Lizzy makes great friends. If she got that from our mom, I guess I dodged it. Horses are so much easier to get along with than humans.

I put another fleck of hay in the hay net for

Nickers to play with. Nelson, my barn cat and Churchill's son, got in on the action and hopped to the feed trough, where he could paw at the hay net with his one white paw. "I thought Geri was coming over to spend the night."

"She is. We're supposed to work on her frog palace. Did I tell you she got a salamander for Christmas? I can't wait to see him! Salamanders really rock, you know? They shed their skins and sometimes eat the old skin for nutrients. And when it's cold—"

"Lizzy," I interrupted. Once she gets going, she talks faster than a trotter trots. *Somebody* has to stop her. "Did you come out here for something?" My sister usually stays as far away from horses as she can. She'll gladly hug spiders and toads and bugs, but she won't even touch Nickers.

Lizzy smacked her forehead with the heel of her hand. "Telephone! For *you!*"

"Me?" I almost never get phone calls. Except from Hawk, Victoria Hawkins, who was still in Florida visiting her dad. But Hawk had been calling at night.

"Sorry." Lizzy set down Churchill. "I can't believe I forgot the phone call! Duh to me. It's a

girl. At first I thought it was Geri. But I think it might be Sal."

I doubted it. Sal, Salena Fry, is in most of my seventh-grade classes, and we get along okay. But she's buddies with Summer Spidell and the popular kids. Summer and I got off on the wrong foot the first time we met, when I was shoveling manure in her dad's fancy stable. I guess you could say we've pretty much stayed on the wrong foot since then.

Lizzy and I plowed through the snow toward the house. Our yard looked a hundred times better snow-covered. You couldn't even see the broken toasters, rolls of wires, and other machine parts Dad keeps around for his inventions and for repairing stuff. Snow had turned the tallest junk into white statues.

Once inside I kicked off my boots and ran to the kitchen phone, hoping the mystery caller was still there. "Hello?"

"Sal, she's here! On the phone!" The voice on the line sounded familiar, but it wasn't Sal. And whoever it was wasn't talking to me. She was screaming away from the phone.

"Hello?" I said again. "Who's this?"

"Uh . . . um . . . it's *going* to be Sal." Then

away from the phone, she screamed, “Sal! You have to come right now! I’m not holding the phone any longer. I mean it!”

“Geri?” I was pretty sure I recognized her voice. “Are you at Sal’s house?”

Lizzy was sticking a tray of cookies into the oven. She stopped and frowned at me.

“Uh . . . hi, Winnie. How are you?”

“What are you doing over there, Geri? Lizzy has been—”

“Oops . . . here’s Sal!”

The phone shuffled and clattered. Then another voice came over the line. “Winnie? Man, am I glad you’re there! I thought you’d never get to the phone.”

“Sal? What’s Geri doing at your house?”

“I can’t understand you, Winnie.”

No wonder. There was a lot of commotion going on in the background at Sal’s house, and Sal wasn’t so easy to understand either. But I knew my voice wasn’t helping. I always sound hoarse. Lizzy says it’s exotic and she wishes she had my voice, but I think my words sound like they’re filtered through gravel.

I cleared my throat, for all the good it would do me, and asked again why Geri was at Sal’s.

“Nathan,” Sal answered.

“Nathan?” Sal’s brother is in sixth grade, like Lizzy and Geri. I’d only seen him a couple of times, but I could picture him. The first time I’d seen Nathan and Lizzy had introduced him as her buddy, Nate, I’d had to fight to keep from laughing. Sal’s pretty out-there, with her wild jewelry and ever-changing hair colors. I’d expected her little brother to have tattoos and a shaved head. But Nathan looked like a regular kid—short dark hair, normal clothes, just a little on the chunky side.

Now I glanced at Lizzy. She looked as confused as I felt.

“If you ask me,” Sal said, “Geri’s got a king-size crush. And I don’t think Nathan even knows what’s up. Guys.” The phone clanked again. Then Sal shouted, “Keep your socks on, Gram! I’m coming!” This was followed by so much noise on the other end of the line that I had to hold the phone away from my ear to keep from going deaf.

The phone rattled again, and Sal shouted, “Winnie, I’m coming right over!”

“You are?” The last time—the *only* time—Sal had come over, she’d acted like our entire

house should have been condemned. She'd made her escape as fast as she could.

"Gram and I have a job for you. For Christmas she—" There was shuffling, then a *bang*, as if she'd dropped the phone. "All right! All right! I said I'm coming!" More shuffling, and Sal was back on the line. "Don't go anywhere! Stay right where you are! I'll explain everything when I get there. I need you desperately, Winnie Willis!"





Horse Talk!

Horses communicate with one another . . . and with us, if we learn to read their cues. Here are some of the main ways a horse talks:

Whinny—A loud, long horse call that can be heard from a half mile away. Horses often whinny back and forth.

***Possible translations:** Is that you over there? Hello! I'm over here! See me? I heard you! What's going on?*

Neigh—To most horse people, a neigh is the same as a whinny. Some people call any vocalization from a horse a neigh.

Nicker—The friendliest horse greeting in the world. A nicker is a low sound made in the throat, sometimes rumbling. Horses use it as a warm greeting for another horse or a trusted person. A horse owner might hear a nicker at feeding time.

***Possible translations:** Welcome back! Good to see you. I missed you. Hey there! Come on over. Got anything good to eat?*

Airplane ears—Ears lopped to the sides usually means the horse is bored or tired.

Possible translations: *Nothing ever happens around here. So, what's next already? Bor-ing.*

Droopy ears—When a horse's ears sag and droop to the sides, it may just be sleepy, or it might be in pain.

Possible translations: *Yawn . . . I am so sleepy. I could sure use some shut-eye. I don't feel so good. It really hurts.*

TAIL

Tail switches hard and fast—An intensely angry horse will switch its tail hard enough to hurt anyone foolhardy enough to stand within striking distance. The tail flies side to side and maybe up and down as well.

Possible translations: *I've had it, I tell you! Enough is enough! Stand back and get out of my way!*

Tail held high—A horse who holds its tail high may be proud to be a horse!

Possible translations: *Get a load of me! Hey! Look how gorgeous I am! I'm so amazing that I just may hightail it out of here!*

Clamped-down tail—Fear can make a horse clamp its tail to its rump.

Possible translations: *I don't like this; it's scary. What are they going to do to me? Can't somebody help me?*

Pointed tail swat—One sharp, well-aimed swat of the tail could mean something hurts there.

Possible translations: *Ouch! That hurts! Got that pesky fly.*

OTHER SIGNALS

Pay attention to other body language. Stamping a hoof may mean impatience or eagerness to get going. A rear hoof raised slightly off the ground might be a sign of irritation. The same hoof raised, but relaxed, may signal sleepiness. When a horse is angry, the muscles tense, back stiffens, and the eyes flash, showing extra white of the eyeballs. One anxious horse may balk, standing stone still and stiff legged. Another horse just as anxious may dance sideways or paw the ground. A horse in pain might swing its head backward toward the pain, toss its head, shiver, or try to rub or nibble the sore spot. Sick horses tend to lower their heads and look dull, listless, and unresponsive.

As you attempt to communicate with your horse and understand what he or she is saying, remember that different horses may use the same sound or signal, but mean different things. One horse may flatten her ears in anger, while another horse lays back his ears to listen to a rider. Each horse has his or her own language, and it's up to you to understand.



Horse-O-Pedia

Advance and Retreat—A patient method of horse gentling that allows the horse to choose to hook up with a trainer. The horse can take steps toward the trainer and be rewarded with “friendly” body language.

Akhal Teke—A small, compact horse with an elegant head. The Akhal Teke, also known as Turkmen, is fast, strong, and reliable—a great, all-around riding horse.

American Saddlebred (or American Saddle Horse)—A showy breed of horse with five gaits (walk, trot, canter, and two extras). They are usually high-spirited, often high-strung; mainly seen in horse shows.

Andalusian—A breed of horse originating in Spain, strong and striking in appearance. They have been used in dressage, as parade horses, in the bullring, and even for herding cattle.

Appaloosa—Horse with mottled skin and a pattern of spots, such as a solid white or brown with oblong, dark spots behind the withers. They’re usually good all-around horses.

Arabian—Believed to be the oldest breed or one of the oldest. Arabians are thought by many to be the most beautiful of all horses. They are characterized by a small head, large eyes, refined build, silky mane and tail, and often high spirits.

Barb—North African desert horse.

Bay—A horse with a mahogany or deep brown to reddish-brown color and a black mane and tail.

Blind-age—Without revealing age.

Buck—To thrust out the back legs, kicking off the ground.

Buckskin—Tan or grayish-yellow-colored horse with black mane and tail.

Caballero—A Spanish or Latin horseman. A cowboy.

Camargue—A tough, surefooted, but high-stepping and beautiful horse native to southern France. Camargues have inspired artists and poets down through the centuries.

Cannon—The bone in a horse's leg that runs from the knee to the fetlock.

Canter—A rolling-gait with a three time pace slower than a gallop. The rhythm falls with the right hind foot, then the left hind and right fore simultaneously, then