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Dear Winnie the Horse Gentler,

I know you're terrific with horses. But how R U with parents?? I LOVE my Paint, but my parents are driving me crazy! Whenever I go 2 a horse show, they HAVE 2 come along. Then they worm their way to the arena and clap and cheer every time I go around. And if I win, they scream so loud! It's totally embarrassing! Can you help?

—Horse Show-bound

I stared at the computer screen, trying to come up with an answer. After school I'd biked straight to Pat's Pets, where I have a part-time job on the Pet Help Line. My friend Catman

Coolidge, who's in eighth grade, answers the cat questions. Another friend, Eddy Barker, who's in seventh grade with me but is way more responsible, does the dog questions. He also works part-time, helping Pat in the pet shop.

I get any e-mails to do with horses. Pat trusts me on the help line because I gentle horses in real life, training them for their owners by figuring them out instead of bullying them.

I'd already handled eight horse e-mails that afternoon, but this one had me stumped.

March had come in like a lion. It was only midmonth, but she was going out like a lamb. Through Pat's window I could count 18 shades of green. It even sounded like spring inside the pet shop. Parrots squawked. Lovebirds sang. New puppies yapped from their pen.

Catman slid over a crate to sit next to me. He stared at my empty screen. He doesn't say much, but he doesn't need to. We get each other. In honor of spring Catman was wearing a lime green leisure suit, which I guess guys wore in the 70s. And a flowered shirt. Maybe it was more like a flower-child shirt, like hippies used to wear in the 60s. That's when Catman should have lived. He would have fit right in.

Catman squinted at me through his wire-rimmed glasses, making his bright blue eyes piercing question marks.

"I know," I answered. "I just can't think of anything to tell somebody whose biggest problem is that her parents care too much about her life."

The truth was, I envied the kid. I only had one parent, and he'd been so tied up working on his current invention that lately we'd barely talked.

Note to self: Life is so unfair.

"Hang tight, Winnie," Catman advised, his eyes not letting me look away.

He knew. Somehow the Catman knew what I was thinking.

My mom had died almost three years ago, a week before my 10th birthday. We were living in Wyoming then so March was still winter. Even though there was a blizzard, I'd talked Mom into driving me to see the horse she was getting me for my birthday. That's when she had the accident. Birthdays weren't something I've looked forward to since then.

Dad was doing his best to raise my sister, Lizzy, and me. He'd quit his job with the insurance company in Laramie and moved us across the United States. We'd stopped for a few

months in each of the *I* states—Illinois, Indiana, and Iowa—for my fifth and sixth grades before ending up in Ashland, Ohio.

We were making it too. Dad had turned into Odd-Job Willis, local handyman and inventor. And I'd become Winnie the Horse Gentler.

Only Dad's current invention had been taking over. It was almost like he wasn't even there. I guess Catman had noticed. He doesn't miss much.

Pat, the owner of the pet store, hollered up, "Catman! Can you help me with these itty-bitty kittens? If they're not the cat's meow! No offense." Pat always excuses herself to animals for using them in expressions.

Catman left and I typed my answer:

Dear Horse Show-bound,

All I can say is that you should be really grateful that you have two parents who love you enough to embarrass you.

—Winnie the Horse Gentler

The bell over the pet shop door rang, and Kaylee Hsu walked in. She glanced around, then waved when she spotted me.

Kaylee is as short as I am. But on her it looks good. She has shiny dark hair and a smile that makes you feel like you know her. If she were a horse, she'd be an easygoing Morgan. I guess she and her parents are Chinese-American, but they must have been in America longer than my relatives, because her English is 100 times better than mine.

I liked Kaylee. But we'd never really done much together. Her parents come to everything at school, and her mom is always the first to volunteer. I was pretty sure they have a lot of money, but Kaylee never acts stuck-up or anything—unlike Summer Spidell, another girl in our seventh-grade class. Summer's dad owns half of Ashland, and Summer acts like she owns the other half.

Kaylee stopped to talk to Pat. All week at school Kaylee had been going on and on about her horse, a buckskin she called Bandit. She didn't really own the gelding. But every spring, as soon as the old trail-riding stable just outside of town opened, she got her parents to go for an hour horseback ride with her. And for the past three years she'd always ridden the same horse.

Happy Trails was opening for their first ride

of the season Saturday—tomorrow—and Kaylee wanted me to go meet her horse today.

“Be right there!” I called, logging off. I said a quick good-bye to Pat and Catman, and left with Kaylee.

We biked the two miles to Happy Trails. Kaylee’s bike is regular. Mine is a back bike, one of Dad’s earliest inventions. I have to pedal backwards to go forward. I hate my bike because of the way people stare at me.

“I can’t wait to see Bandit!” Kaylee said for the 100th time. “I go to that old livery for only one reason. Bandit. Wait until you see him, Winnie. They call him Buck, because he’s a buckskin. But I’ve always called him Bandit. The first time I rode him, he stole a Snickers out of my back pocket and ate it, paper and all.” She grinned sheepishly at me. “And now he has stolen my heart. I know it’s silly. But for almost three years, I’ve pretended Bandit is mine.”

I knew how Kaylee felt. I’d felt the same way about my horse, the most beautiful Arabian in the world. I’d dreamed of owning Nickers when people were still calling her Wild Thing. “It’s not silly at all, Kaylee.”

“I knew you would understand, Winnie.”

When Happy Trails came into view, it surprised me how run-down the place was. Weeds hid half the hand-painted letters on the Happy Trails sign. Beer and pop cans littered the hill.

"I've never seen it this dilapidated," Kaylee said.

We left the bikes and walked up the lane, dodging puddles. About 10 horses' lengths from the stable was an old house. Both buildings had plywood nailed to the roof where shingles should have been. I had a feeling the stable had been nice once, log-cabin style, with hitching posts, like a Pony Express outpost. But now it was a rotten place for a horse to live. I thought about Stable-Mart, the ritzy stable owned by Summer Spidell's dad. What a difference!

Note to self: Life is so unfair for horses too.

It didn't look like anybody was around as I followed Kaylee into the stable. Inside it was dark and dank, and my first impulse was to set the prisoners free. The stalls were so small I wondered if the horses could even lie down or turn around in them.

Kaylee was already peeking into stalls. "Bandit?" she called.

When my eyes got used to the dark, I walked up to the first horse, an old Palomino. She was swatting flies with her tail. I hadn't seen a single fly at my barn. I'd thought it was too early for them. The mare didn't look up, even when I clicked for her. Her trough was empty, and I didn't see a water bucket. The manure had piled on the floor so long that it smelled like acid and vinegar.

"This is the mare Mom rode last year," Kaylee said, stopping two stalls down from me.

"It's great your mom rides with you," I said, trying not to think about the way my mom and I used to ride together.

"It's so dark in here!" Kaylee complained. "Bandit?"

I counted eight horses in the barn. At the next stall a roan Quarter Horse hung his head, as listless as the Palomino.

"Here you are, Bandit!" Kaylee cried. "It's me, Kaylee!"

I'd started down to Kaylee, when all of a sudden she screamed.

There was a crash, as if the horse had kicked down the stall.

"Kaylee!" I cried, running to her. "Are you okay?"

The back stall was even darker than the others. But I could make out a cream-colored horse that might have been a buckskin. He had his ears back and teeth bared.

"Bandit," Kaylee pleaded, approaching the stall again, "don't you remember me?"

"Be careful," I warned. The gelding's eyes were white with fear and anger. He looked too sweaty for the cool of the barn. His ribs and bony back stuck out, and I could smell his fear.

"I have to get closer," I said, feeling for the stall latch, as rage burned inside me. I could make out tiny scars on his rump and sides. It didn't take much imagination to picture the whip and spurs that had made those marks.

"Kaylee," I said, gripping the stall door so hard I felt splinters under my fingernails, "this horse has been abused."





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