“Hey Mom, I’d like to take Glenna for a ride this afternoon. Is that Okay?”

“I guess so, but shouldn’t you wait for your father to come home?”

“No, I’ll be fine.”

“Wear your helmet!” my mom called out to me as I ran out of the house.

Glenhafen Tigerlily was the full name of my registered Welsh pony, but we called her “Glenna” for short. She was the bane of my existence when I was an 11 year old. Taking her down the road, she would spin around in circles until I was too tired to fight and gave up and went home. She would pin me up against a wall in her stall when I attempted to groom her. She bit me when I cinched up her girth. At horse camp she embarrassed me by pretending she didn’t know basic commands. And in a horse show she would kick other horses and start a skirmish in the ring with spectators enjoying the excitement of a ruckus. But every girl dreams of owning a pony, right? Actually, I didn’t even ask for a pony, but was still blessed with one. I was a lucky girl.

It was my father’s idea to buy me a pony in an attempt to get me to do something other than read a book. When he was growing up they always had a few animals around, including horses. So when the opportunity came to purchase Glenna from a fancy farm in Connecticut, my father jumped on it, promising a good home for a well-trained, obedient pony. She was even big for a pony—so there was room for me to grow, a concept my father was always fond of taking advantage of, resulting in us always riding bikes that were too big for us, wearing sneakers one size too large, and now riding a pony too strong and willful.

Glenna came without instructions, and my knowledge of horses was limited to the horses I read about in my books like *My Friend Flicka* (sounds friendly, right?) and *Misty of Chincoteague* where horses galloped freely in packs and were beautiful to behold. Or from watching *Bonanza* on television on a Sunday afternoon in a smoke filled room with my grandfather where the cowboys galloped around gracefully in the middle of a crowded western town. Horses in the abstract were appealing to me, but up close they were a little scary. And unlike today where you might expect a lesson or two, kids back then were expected to just teach themselves to ride, perhaps getting a few pointers along the way from a helpful parent. My father, however, was a little distracted when it came to this duty. Therefore, I had to discover on my own that the first and main thing you need to know about horses is that you need to show them who is boss right away, or you are doomed. I was a pre-teen when we brought Glenna home. Glenna, although only five, was an adult in horse years. By the time I learned about this essential rule of horsemanship, it was far too late—she had left me behind—literally.

As I approached the barn, she whinnied at me, nodding her head in a way that by then I knew was not friendly. A stranger might be fooled by this nod, and think, *What a pretty horse,* but at this point, I was no stranger to her wiles. She was not saying “hello,” she was saying “You better be here to feed me, you fool.” In spite of this knowledge, I approached her as if I loved her, which I suppose I did. She was a beautiful pony which just added to her deceptive charm. She was a bay with the prerequisite black mane and tail and she sported a deep russet coat that that day was just starting to thicken for winter, making her look like she needed a haircut. It was probably the unusualness of her unkempt appearance that made me let down my guard when I was cinching up the saddle. I was used to a nip in response to my knee in her side to get her to stop holding her breathe, but this time she latched onto my arm in earnest. It should have been a warning, but I guess I was a little naïve.

I succeeded in getting Glenna to leave the yard that day with me on her back, which in itself was an accomplishment. She preferred to stay close to the feed bucket, and as a result had grown rotund under my care. She had also grown quite lazy, so that although she knew the normal commands given a horse to get them to move, she often chose to forget them when I was around. I had spent many “rides” actually leading her around since she would not respond to my directions. Another trick, which she immediately tried, was to try to drop her head to graze which if unchecked can pitch a rider forward, and even cause a tumble not unlike going over the handlebars of a bike. I was ready for it this time. I now know this is very normal behavior for ponies and horses, but back then it seemed like she had an eating disorder. All roads led back to the feedbag as far as she was concerned. I urged her forward into a bone jangling jog. At that point I had not switched to riding using an English saddle where you would post while trotting, which is basically standing up to avoid the bumps. Riding western style meant you had to sit out the jog. Although this was unpleasant, I preferred the western saddle with a horn. It was something to grab onto, although of course you are not supposed to hold on to the horn if you are riding properly. I was easing her along the perimeter of a field about a half mile away from her barn, but it was still in her sight. I was sick of bouncing around in the saddle at a jog. This is a disadvantage of riding a pony—they tend to have more jarring gaits than horses since they are smaller. I decided I had done enough jogging for that day and urged her into a lope, which is more of a rocking, gentle gait. She was refusing to lope, since as I said, she was lazy.

I dug my heels into her fat belly, but she still refused. I think she also enjoyed me flopping around on her back like a rag doll instead. It made her feel in control, which of course was a valid feeling, since she mostly was. As we rounded the corner of the field, she became aware of the barn facing her. All of a sudden, she decided to respond to my feet digging into her sides, not with a lope, but with a full blown, cowboy-style gallop. It was not the cowboys in *Bonanza* I was recalling at that moment with their easy solid seats in their saddles. In fact, I believe galloping only really happens on television; it’s discouraged in real life. Even in those romantic scenes where you see couples on horses on a beach, they are actually cantering not galloping—it would probably muss their hair. I actually only remember flashes of my surroundings: trees, grass, sky, more trees. I also remember shouts from my parents. My dad had arrived home just in time to witness the incident. And the sound of Glenna’s hoofs: thump, thump, thump…. I was clinging to the horn, the saddle was starting to slip and so was I. It was probably the saddle that kept me from breaking anything, namely my skull, since I had not worn a helmet as my mother advised. I had not cinched the girth tightly enough around her fat belly, and for once my ineptitude paid off. The saddle slid in slow motion under her belly, depositing me on the ground in the process. It was not a soft fall, but I was not seriously hurt.

I’m not sure what possessed me to ride Glenna by myself that day, in spite of my mother’s words of caution. I was already suffering from a bruised foot from her stomping on me that very morning. I guess I was just hopeful that she would miraculously change, turning into that storybook or movie star horse that I so admired. There were things I enjoyed about her, but that mostly didn’t involve riding her. I liked to bury my face in her neck and breathe her horse smell. I liked French braiding her mane, a talent I still have today with human subjects. I enjoyed her beauty and grace. I liked how she turned furry in time for the winter months. I liked that she was mine. And to give her her due, she couldn’t help that she had been sold to such a hapless owner. She was just behaving as horses do when left to their own devices. She turned into one of those wild ponies on the island of Chincoteague under my tutelage.

It’s interesting to look back on this moment from the perspective of a parent. I was nervous about my kids riding bikes, never mind ponies. If I did concede to buying a horse, I would have made sure they had lessons, and I probably would have been hovering around them whenever they went near it. Were my parents remiss in being so cavalier about ownership of a horse? Probably. Did I learn anything other than humiliation at the hands of Glenna? I think so.