

## Sweet as Sugar

She came to me unexpectedly, and seeing her that first time was quite a shock. She belonged to one of the men who was remodeling my house, and he brought her to my place to graze on all my long and lush grass, which is exactly what she was doing when I pulled into the driveway and saw her for the first time.

The look of her legs made me gasp; how she could even walk on them was both a mystery and a miracle. Both of her legs were grotesquely bent outward above her knees, and inward below them. The knees themselves were twice the size that they should have been, and her hooves had not been trimmed for ages.

Her name was “Minnie” but they called her “Gramma” because she was old, twenty-five, I was told, but none of it was true. I later learned that she was actually thirty-five, and her real name was “Mindy.” None of it mattered, of course. I loved the horse from the moment I saw her, and decided then and there that this was where she’d remain. It really didn’t matter what her name was, as she was as close to being totally deaf as she was ever going to be, but because she was as sweet as sugar, that’s what I started calling her.

Sugar, who greeted me whenever she saw me with her low, mellow nicker. Sugar, who loved to be touched, brushed and talked to, despite years of cruel and thoughtless treatment. I cried after I heard her sad story from the shameless man who had year after year forced her to endure what must have been agony.

When she was still a young mare she had been in a trailer that had crumbled around her in a crash, crushing her front legs. One or both of her knees had been broken, but she was never seen by a vet. Instead, she was left to heal unaided, as best she could, which wasn’t very well. But that wasn’t all. As soon as she was able to bear her own weight, she was used, year after year, for breeding. The extra weight of each endless pregnancy must have must have been an excruciating pain to bear on her poor, broken and deformed legs. The man who was working for me was actually allowing his four kids, aged seven to fourteen, to ride her, when no weight at all should have been on her back. By the time she had come to me her back sagged piteously, and every step was a struggle.

But struggle she did, getting up every morning without complaint, to chew the tasty green grass that continued to last long past the time when other pastures had turned to the ochre of an oncoming winter.

I found out only by chance that her current owner was planning to have her removed while I was at work (now that she was sufficiently fattened on grass and the sweet grain and treats that I bought for her.) His plan was to sell her at auction, where he had to know that she would go to slaughter. I learned of it the day before it was to happen, and angrily called him at home, and told him that I would buy her from him. When he showed up the next day for work, he found that what he had heard from me the night before was only a warm up for what he heard from me then. I found that I couldn’t stop myself from telling him exactly what I thought of him, and none of it was very warm or friendly. I told him that he would have to answer for what he had planned

to do to this horse in his “life review,” and that no God I knew would look kindly upon him. I heard myself go on and on, and wondered where my brakes had gone, but I couldn’t stop. I knew that I was myself being unkind and causing another to feel uncomfortable, but I was so outraged that I had to let it out. In retrospect, I realize that I was reacting to every cruelty that Sugar had endured, and giving all of my sorrow and anger to only one of those responsible for her troubles. But he was the one who was willing to put her through an incredible agony, all for a few dollars, while I was paying him better than anyone else had in years. I wasn’t sorry for my stinging words, and only stopped when it occurred to me that if I didn’t, he might take a loss on her and send her to slaughter just to spite me.

In the end I bought her for fifty dollars, far less than I was prepared to pay for her. Her former owner lost his job the day that I acquired the sweetest horse I’ve ever known, and it was a trade off that I’ve never regretted.

The first thing I did was have the vet and a horse-shoer come out and work on Sugar’s hooves, hoping that it would make her more comfortable, and allow her to get around more easily. It worked, and she began following me around like a puppy. She even tried to follow me into the house a time or two, and if there had been room in there for her, I probably would have let her come in. I continued to concentrate on getting her in the best shape possible all through that winter, and we became the best of friends.

Spring came, and Sugar happily and hungrily greeted the new and tender shoots of grass. She was looking much healthier, and I knew she was, at last, a happy horse. I hoped I’d have her with me for many more Springs, so much a part of my life had she become.

In the middle of April, I had a vivid and beautiful dream that I was watching Sugar run in a field of wildflowers, and her legs were perfect; she was young again. I awoke with a feeling of happiness that soon turned to dread, as I realized that the dream might mean that Sugar was dead, released from the shackles that were her own legs, and running once more, beyond this life.

I bounded out of bed and yanked some clothes on, and ran outside to find her. I was greeted by her gentle whinny, velvet brown nose, and lovely soft eyes. I was so relieved that I cried with happiness, not knowing what was to come.

On May first, I didn’t see her in the morning. “She must be sleeping in,” I thought. When I still hadn’t seen her after an hour or so, I went looking for her, expecting the worst. I couldn’t find her at first, and expanded my search, really worried by then. I found her in the Sumac, still alive, but in bad shape. She called to me when she saw me, just as she always did, and I burst into tears.

She must have stumbled in the thick sumac; why she would have been grazing there, I don’t know, but when she fell, she fell with her legs heading uphill, making it impossible for her to get up. I raced back up to the house and called a neighbor for help, then hurried down to where she lay, helpless, bringing her food and water. She was thirsty and hungry, and I realized then that she might have fallen as long ago as the evening before. I waited with her, frantic inside, for my neighbor to get there. My hope was that together we could flip her over and get her into a

position that would allow her to get up. I prayed that she would be able to get up, and that she would be all right.

When my neighbor arrived, we struggled to turn her to her other side, only to find, when we were finally successful, that a slender sumac trunk had pierced her side when she went down. How serious her injury was we couldn't tell, but I ran back up to the house to call for the vet to come out.

The vet couldn't come; his wife had just had a premature baby, but he told me to come and get some injections that might help Sugar. I hung up the phone and returned to the pasture to find my neighbor jubilant—Sugar was standing up and drinking from a five-gallon bucket! Just as I was about to shout my delight and thanks to him, I witnessed my sweet horse suddenly collapse and crash to the ground in a heap, hitting her head hard on the ground in the process. I screamed out her name as I ran to where she lay, and when I reached her, she greeted me with her soft whinny. I was sobbing uncontrollably by then, but I tried to comfort her, telling her that she'd be okay, she just needed to rest, that I'd come back with some medicine to make her stronger.

I sped to the vets, crying all the way. A part of me knew what the outcome was going to be, but as long as she was alive and wanted to try to get up, I felt that I had to do whatever I could to help her. The vet gave me the injections and promised to come to my farm for her the following day if need be.

I returned home to find her still struggling to get up. I calmed her down, gave her the injections, gave her more water, wetted her down with water, gave her more food, sprayed her with flyspray, and sat with her, stroking her and talking to her; waiting and praying for a miracle.

I couldn't sleep that night worrying about her and wondering if she'd ever get up again. I went down to check on her several times during the night, and each time found her sleeping. Because she was so nearly deaf, she never heard me coming, and I was careful not to make enough noise to wake her. I figured the sleep would do her good after all she'd been through, and might even refresh her enough to give her the strength to get up on her own when the next day began.

I woke up early that next morning to find her still down. I called the vet and arranged for him to come later in the morning, and asked him to bring the drugs to euthanize her if he thought that there was no hope for her. My neighbor came over that morning and tried once more to get her up, but it was no use. He offered to come back and shoot her for me, but I couldn't stand the thought of a painful and violent death; most of her life had been filled with pain and mistreatment at human hands. If death was to come to her that morning, it was going to come gently, and with love. After he left I sat down in front of her and stroked her beautiful face and looked into her eyes. I couldn't speak, and tears were streaming down my face. Our eyes locked, and I felt that I was looking into her soul, and I knew that she was seeing mine. The air stood still, the wind did not blow, there was no buzz of bee or fly that I was aware of; I was conscious only of the deep connection of our hearts and souls at that moment. I will never forget the power of those few minutes, when we wordlessly exchanged communication. I told her I loved her, and that I didn't want her to go. I told her she had to try to get up, that it was her only hope. She let out a huge sigh, her eyes never leaving mine, and told me that she couldn't get up. She wanted

to, but she couldn't, and she told me that it was her time to go. I sobbed and cried "no," but I knew it was true. I calmed down then, and went to get her some of her favorite treats. I came back and stayed with her until the vet came. He examined her and told me what I already knew—she was not able to get back up. I stayed with her while he injected the tranquilizer, then the euthanasia drug; I stroked her as she died quickly and quietly.

That night I dreamt that she was running in a field of green grass and wildflowers. She was young again, and her legs were perfect.

It is said that we humans must speak for the animals because they have no voices, and in some cases, that is true. But on another level, it is not true at all. If we open our hearts, our minds, and our souls to them, we can hear what they think, feel, and have to tell us, and we will come to understand just how wise they really are.

