

The Hiding

by Lisa Wysocky

Emma peeked into her daughter's room. Sarah was tucked into bed and had on her pink Appaloosa pajamas. Well actually, they were 101 Dalmation pajamas, but six-year old Sarah was wildly horse crazy and called them her Appaloosa jammies, after the breed of colorful spotted horses.

"Would you like me to read tonight, or tell you a story?" Emma asked.

"Story!"

"Okay, let's see," mused Emma. "Okay, here's one I don't think I've ever told you before."

When I was still in high school I took a job at a local dude ranch. I started out as a trail guide, accompanying groups on trail rides through the woods. I hadn't been there too long before I was promoted to riding instructor. The ranch had a riding program along with several area schools, and it was my responsibility for more than a year to see that the kids learned enough about riding to receive credit for it.

But my big break came the summer I graduated. My new position was barn manager and I was in charge of ordering hay and supplies, assigning work schedules, scheduling lessons and trail rides, and buying and selling the trail and schooling horses.

"Did you have fun, Mommy?" Sarah asked.

"Oh, yes," sighed Emma. "I had loads of fun!"

"Story!"

"Okay, but if you want to hear, don't interrupt," said Emma with a tickle to her daughter's ribs.

Now, many of the horses we had in our barn were retired schooling or show horses. They were really good older horses, who would follow the trail at the same slow, safe pace, no matter what. But sooner or later, they would get too old to be ridden regularly, and then we'd find a nice home for them. Of course, that left us short of horses in

the barn, so I'd have to go to the monthly horse auction to buy new ones.

This particular month the owner of the ranch, a really unpleasant man named Horace, said that we had to buy five or six good horses. Usually when we went we'd buy two, or maybe three horses. But it was early summer and I guess he thought we'd be busy.

So I hooked up the horse trailer and gathered one of the stable hands to help me. Joe was a tough, wiry little kid with a really big heart, and he was good company, too. I was looking forward to the sale, Sarah, because, as you know, I have always found auctions to be really fascinating places.

"Mommy, remember when we went?" piped Sarah. "There was a whole row of real cowboys sitting on a fence rail, and they were spitting in the sawdust. And in the back there were a whole bunch of kids running around playing."

"I remember, and you promised me you wouldn't spit. Not ever," said Emma.

"Cross my hear and hope to die. Spitting is yucky."

Okay. Getting back to my story. As Joe and I were browsing through the barns looking for horses, we heard a number of ear-shattering "E-haw, E-haw's." Well, there was nothing to do but to follow the noise, and we came upon an elderly gray donkey the size of a large pony. He was very cute and his enormous gray ears flopped wildly every time he E-haw'ed, but his eyes were friendly, and he seemed gentle.

"You know," said Joe as he gravely studied the donkey, "he looks a bit like Horace, don't he?"

Well, I had to admit that he did. He had the same hooked Roman nose, large lips, liquid brown eyes, and graying hair. The resemblance was actually quite strong.

"Let's buy him," cried Joe excitedly. "We could make a pack horse out of him! Let's do it!"

He'd be really useful."

Oh, Joe, I don't know, I said doubtfully. Horace expects us to come back with some good riding horses . . . Does he ride, I asked the man in the stall?

He didn't.

How about packing, does he carry a load, I asked hopefully? The donkey *was* kind of cute.

He didn't pack.

"Well," asked Joe, "What does he do?"

"E-haw, E-haw," said the little donkey. Apparently that was all he did.

I told Joe that under the circumstances, there wasn't much use for the donkey at the ranch and we went on in search of likelier prospects.

The donkey came into the sale ring about half-way through the sale. I had already bought four good horses and was waiting to bid on one more.

"Here comes Horace," said Joe.

Horace! What the heck was he doing here? Checking up on me, I supposed.

Where? I asked, looking all around.

"There in the ring," said Joe pointing to the donkey.

Oh, Joe, you can't call that donkey Horace, I said. Horace will be insulted and we'll lose our jobs.

Oh, what the heck, I thought, the donkey would be sold and we'd never see him again.

"What'll I have," interrupted the auctioneer. "What'll I have, gimme a hunnerd dollar bill, a hunnerd dollar bill, how 'bout eighty dollar, eighty dollar now, how 'bout . . ."

There were no takers.

". . . fifty dollar now, who'll give me fifty dollar bills . . ."

A man in the corner raised his hand.

"Forty," he shouted.

We turned to look at the bidder.

"That's that Smith fellow from the packing plant!" shouted Joe. "We can't let them turn Horace into dog food. Let's buy him. We've just got to."

"Forty dollar. Forty dollar bills. Forty dollar going once. Going twice, and . . ."

"Fifty."

I looked around to see who had bid the fifty dollars and was surprised to find that I had.

"Sold for fifty dollars to the young lady," said the auctioneer.

Well, Sarah, I couldn't believe what I had done! I knew Horace, our boss, was going to kill me, but I didn't have much choice other than to haul Horace, the donkey, back to the ranch. We arrived back late and turned the new horses, along with Horace, out in an acre lot with the other dude horses. Horace had been fairly silent on the trip and I prayed that he would remain so. Several loud E-haw's would make Horace's presence very real.

The next morning Horace, the man, made one of his surprise trips to the dude barn.

"How'd it go last night?" he asked, referring to the trip to the sale barn.

Oh, uh, fine, I told him. Got several good ones, I think.

"Walt said he heard you come in late."

I had no answer to that. Walt was a live-in handy man for the ranch. He didn't really do much around the place, but he and Horace went way back so I guessed it didn't really matter if Walt did anything or not. What did matter was that Walt and I didn't see eye to eye.

"Walt also said he heard a donkey braying all night. You wouldn't by any chance have bought a donkey at the sale, would you?"

Oh, Horace, I thought to myself, couldn't you have kept quiet for even one night? I may as well confess, I thought. Horace, the man, would find out sooner or later, but before I could answer he continued.

"I certainly hope you didn't. I hate donkeys," he said with venom. "Wouldn't have one on the place, so I'm glad to hear that Walt must be mistaken."

I didn't recall denying Horace's claim about having a donkey on the place. But given the circumstances, I decided to let sleeping dogs lie and find a way to get Horace—Horace the donkey that is—off the place as soon as possible.

As soon as Horace—Horace the man who

signed my paychecks—left the ranch, I paged Joe, who was out in the round pen, checking out one of the new riding horses.

When Joe arrived at the barn office I told him that we had to get Horace out of there because Horace hates donkeys.

"But Horace can't hate donkeys. Horace is a donkey," said Joe with some confusion.

No, he isn't. He's a man. Usually. I mean, yes, Horace is a donkey. Boy, this was getting confusing. What I meant, I said, is that our boss, Horace, hates donkeys so we have to get rid of Horace, the donkey, before Horace, our boss, finds out Horace, the donkey, is here.

But that was a task that was easier talked about than accomplished. There were seven big barns on the ranch and a number of sheds, holding pens, and corrals, so finding a place to hide Horace was fairly easy. How long it would be before someone discovered the little donkey was another matter altogether.

Joe and I managed to move Horace, the donkey, to the far corner of a boarding barn that was only partially full. He E-haw'ed several times during the move, but I was certain no one heard. The owners of the horses in that particular barn usually came out only on weekends, and seeing that this was Tuesday, I felt we had bought a little time. Joe fed that barn and cleaned the stalls so I hoped that our secret was, temporarily, safe.

The next morning Horace, the man, was waiting for me when I arrived at work.

Good morning, I said brightly. No matter that my heart was thudding wildly somewhere in the pit of my stomach.

"Ah, yes," said Horace. "Ahem . . . I know we talked about this yesterday, but I've heard more reports about a donkey being somewhere on the ranch. I have also heard that he has been named after me . . . You wouldn't know anything about that now would you?"

Ah, well, ah, um . . . actually . . .

Horace gave me a questioning look. "Well, apparently not," he said as he turned to leave. "But if you hear anything on this matter, I'd appreciate knowing about it. I won't have any

donkey on my property. Particularly if it's named after me!"

I found Joe and told him we had to get Horace, the donkey, off the ranch today. Joe was still in high school and lived with his parents in town, so no room for an old gray donkey there. I boarded my horses out and couldn't afford the board on another, so I spent the afternoon on the phone, trying to give Horace, the donkey, away.

I was fading rapidly from frustration to despair when Joe burst into the office.

"Walt is headed over to the boarding barn, we've got to stop him!"

Quickly, I paged Walt to the dude barn, double stat, hoping he'd do what he was supposed to for once.

Okay, Joe, I said looking out the window. Walt's on his way over here. You go get Horace and hide him somewhere else.

"But where?"

I don't care, I shouted. Anywhere. Just hurry.

While Joe ran off to move Horace, I went out and opened the gate to the lot housing the dude horses.

Hiya, hiya, I whispered, swishing my battered cowboy hat at the milling horses. Luckily they were only too happy to help me out by running through the open gate. By the time Walt sauntered up, I managed to look as if I had been trying for hours to get the horses back in through the gate. And, to be truthful, it took us the better part of an afternoon to round up the newly freed horses.

"So Mommy, you let the horses out on purpose?" asked Sarah.

"I did."

"Did you get in trouble?"

"Not just then," I said. "I thanked Walt for helping me and kind of on purpose got him confused as to how it happened."

Walt looked as if he were about to say something, but just shook his head and walked away.

Later on I asked Joe where Horace ended up and Joe he said he'd put him in the brood mare barn.

The brood mare barn. The Brood Mare Barn, I cried. Joe, everyone—just everyone—goes in

there to see the babies. Oh, we're in for it now.

Now most of the mares were done foaling so it wasn't a highly trafficked area, but there were a number of people in and out checking on a few of the later babies.

"No it'll be all right," Joe protested. "I put him in a stall covered with black plastic and threw a whole bale of hay in there so he'll be too busy eating to bray."

We sometimes covered the stalls of nervous mares with black plastic so the surrounding activity wouldn't upset them, so the black plastic wouldn't draw any suspicion. But I knew that Horace was only safe until he ate his fill. After that he'd start his braying and Horace, the man, was sure to find out. After some serious thinking I proposed a plan to Joe. We had to move Horace, the donkey, off the ranch without Horace, the man, finding out. And we had to do it that night. I could think of only one solution and Joe agreed with me.

That afternoon, you see, instead of going home to work with my own horses, Joe and I stayed at the ranch. It wasn't unusual for us to work late, although it didn't happen very often. We found some busywork and as night approached we pulled two horses in from the lot and saddled them up. We were just about ready when I heard footsteps at the end of the aisle. Turning with dismay, I saw Walt and Horace—Horace the man—walking toward us.

"Going for a late ride?" asked Horace. "Thought you two would get enough riding in during the day."

Ah, well, um . . . I always was tongue tied whenever Horace was around.

"There's a tree that's fallen across the trail about a half mile out," said Joe quickly. "We, ah . . . we've got a big ride coming in tomorrow morning and we thought we'd see if we could clear the trail."

Yay, Joe. Good thinking, I thought. The part about the tree was true enough, I just hoped Horace didn't check the log book, for there was no ride scheduled.

"Oh. Good enough, then," said Horace with a

nod. "See, Walt, I told you there'd be a reason. Let's go over to the brood mare barn next."

The Brood Mare Barn! I shot Joe a look, which he interpreted correctly and he slipped out the side door.

Oh, Horace, by the way, I called as I stalled for time. I interested Horace in a new marketing idea I'd had for the dude barn, delaying him for about five minutes. Long enough, I hoped, for Joe to get Horace out of the brood mare barn.

"E-haw, E-haw."

Oh, Horace, not now, I thought.

"What was that," cried Horace, the man.

"E-haw, E-haw."

"That's it. You can't fool me any longer. There *is* a donkey on my place," screamed Horace. "And you," he sputtered, pointing a shaking finger in my direction, "you must be behind this."

Just as I was praying the earth would open up and swallow me whole, Joe slipped back in the side door, braying and E-hawing at the top of his lungs.

"E-haw, E-haw," brayed Joe. "Got you fooled, didn't I Walt? I've been practicing up. Sounds pretty good don't it? E-haw."

Horace and Walt exchanged a pair of unbelieving looks, shook their heads and went on toward the brood mare barn, glancing back at Joe once or twice.

Where's Horace, I hissed to Joe.

"He just walked out the door with Walt."

No, not that Horace. The other Horace.

"Oh. He's in the middle of the dude lot. He's shorter than all the horses, so unless he drifts to the edge, Horace will never see him."

Joe and I led our horses to the edge of the lot and Joe fetched Horace, the donkey, while I held our horses. We finally set off. Me riding one horse, leading another, and Joe leading Horace on foot. Horace the donkey had never learned to be led from a horse.

"Where did you take Horace, Mommy?" asked Sarah, her eyes wide.

"Well, next to the ranch were just acres and areas of a wildlife preserve that was owned by the state. Several of our trail rides went through part

of the preserve so Joe and I were were familiar with the layout."

Sarah nodded wisely.

My plan was to turn Horace out in the wildlife preserve. There were wildlife shelters out there, lots of grass, and if he ever got hurt, it was patrolled enough that someone would spot him and bring him in to the vet station. Joe wasn't happy about the plan, but he couldn't think of anything better and neither could I.

We turned Horace loose a mile into the preserve. He immediately began eating some of the meadow grass, and only E-haw'ed once as we left. Joe rode silently several lengths behind me on the way back and I knew better than to look back at him. Joe was having a hard time losing his new friend.

"Did you ever see Horace the donkey again," asked Sarah?

"We did! We saw Horace several times after that as we led trail rides into the preserve. He was fat and happy and he even followed the rides for a mile or two. The park rangers had noted his presence, and after a few months they stopped wondering how he got there, just noting on their forms when and where he had been sighted."

"And he lived out there happily ever after," said Sarah.

"Yes honey, he sure did."

But as for Horace, the man, he began hearing "E-haws" all over the place. I heard it got so bad that he couldn't sleep at night, and gradually he stopped coming to the ranch. I heard later, after I went away to college, that he sold the ranch and invested in a ski resort. I thought that it was a good move for him, and doubted if he'd run into any donkeys on a ski slope. But then again, who knows?

Author's Note: The Hiding is based on a real event. Horace was a real live donkey, just as the other Horace was a real live man. Only, the names have been changed to protect the innocent. Please check back at www.powerofhorses.com for new stories periodically throughout the year.

About the Author: Born and raised in Minnesota, Lisa Wysocky had early success on the national and world championship horse show circuit. She soon was asked to begin speaking and writing about horses. A knee injury cut short Lisa's career as a trainer, but she quickly ventured into music. Six years with Nashville's afternoon paper, the *Nashville Banner*, and her reputation in the music industry as a writer of quality biographical and promotional material, piloted Lisa to a career in public relations.

Recently, Lisa served as general manager of the independent record label, Scarlet Moon Records, and authored the *only* book about country music stars and their horses, *The Power of Horses: True Stories from Country Music Stars*, which features true horse stories and original photos from 18 of country music's top artists. A mystery, *The Opium Equation*, is due out in 2003. Lisa is also active in assisting clients with their public image and with their interview skills, writes a weekly syndicated celebrity lifestyles column for Ag Features called *Down Home*, and is a regular featured guest on Jones Radio Networks syndicated overnight show, *Danny Wright All Night*.

A witty, down-to-earth speaker, Lisa gives her audiences 'news they can use', along with step-by-step advice on how they can create their own success stories.

Also by Lisa Wysocky

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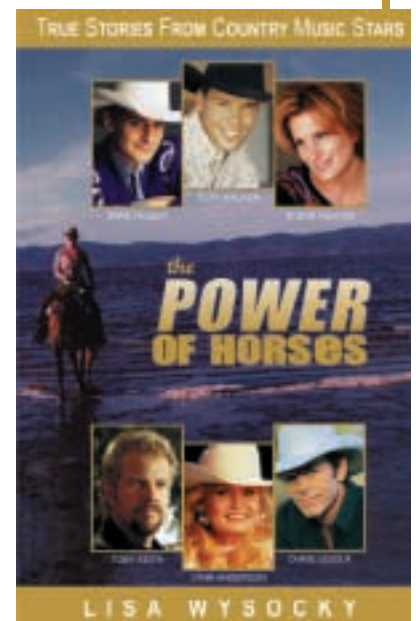
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