

A Fresh Start

Jill watched as her father unloaded her wheelchair from their minivan, trying not to scrape it against the door as he maneuvered it through an opening that was barely large enough for the chair to fit. She forced a smile, but inside she felt like screaming. Why did this have to happen to her? Why couldn't she have been taken, like her mom had been, in the accident all those years ago? Biting her lip, Jill took a deep breath and caught her father's eyes as he looked up at her.

"Ready, Freddy?" her father asked, reaching up to lift Jill by the waist and lower her into the chair.

Jill nodded and held out her hands. Over her father's shoulder, she caught sight of the other children being dropped off for the weekend routine. Some had wheelchairs like hers, others walked by on crutches or had their legs firmly fastened into metal braces. Everywhere she looked, Jill saw children who, like her, were learning to live with physical challenges. She sighed.

Her father glanced at her with a small frown on his face. "How are your arms feeling today?" he asked. "Dr. Bass said he really wanted you to work on getting stronger."

"Yes, Dad, I know. I've been doing lots of physical therapy here, and I think I'm getting a little stronger each day. It's just..." Jill paused.

"I know," her dad said, "it's just that lifting weights and swimming gets a little monotonous after a while, right?"

Jill reached up to give him a big hug. He always seemed to know what she was thinking. She forced another smile. "I'll be fine. You'd better get going now. See you tonight."

As her father drove away, Jill turned her wheelchair around and rolled toward the front entrance. "Might as well get started," she sighed to herself. "The sooner I start, the sooner I'll be done."

That night at the dinner table, Jill decided to bring up the thought that had been floating through her mind all day. "Can I quit the program?" she asked. Her father glanced up from his plate of food, looking distressed, like he wanted to disappear under the table.

"Honey, you know the doctor told us that you have to get stronger," he said unhappily. "I wish there was another way, but I think this is our best option."

For the hundredth time that day, Jill wished she had perished in the accident that took her mom's life. At least then she wouldn't be trapped in a daily schedule that left her wanting to scream because she was so bored. She reminded herself that it wasn't her

dad's fault and turned the conversation to how his day had gone.

Later, as the two of them sat watching the news, a story about a local stable that specialized in teaching kids with disabilities to ride and care for horses caught her attention. She wasn't sure it would be a good idea to ask, but finally couldn't help herself. "Dad," she whispered, "are you paying attention to this?"

He nodded, tears glistening in his eyes. When the reporters switched to another story, he turned to Jill. "Should I call your doctor and find out if this might work for you?" His daughter's laughter was answer enough.

When her father picked her up after school the next day, he explained to her that the doctor had called back and said that working with horses would be a great choice for Jill if she was interested in trying it. Jill felt like yelping with joy, but she would hate to make him feel like he had failed in case it didn't work out, so she simply smiled and said, "Thanks, Dad!" She knew how hard her father had tried to locate suitable programs for her ever since the accident. Still, there was no wiping the grin off her face as they drove home.

The rest of the week flew by. Every day after school, Jill poured over horse magazines and books. She wanted to learn as much as she could before the weekend came. Finally, Saturday morning arrived. Pushing off her covers, Jill stretched her arms and began to inch over to her wheelchair. Her face was bright and cheerful because today was the day she would start her new program. She slid into her wheelchair and rolled over to her dresser where she changed very slowly into her clothes. For the thousandth time, Jill reflected on how the simplest things now seemed to take forever.

After breakfast, Jill and her father started out for the stables. The van was quiet; the motor was the only sound until her father broke the silence. "Ready?" Her father never seemed to say much anymore. He always seemed to wear a quiet veil of sadness, not like how he used to be before the accident.

"Ready as I'll ever be!" was Jill's nervous response.

When they pulled into to the graveled driveway of the horse ranch, they were greeted by a brown-haired lady with dark eyes and big lips. She looked to be in her thirties and had sparkling white teeth. Jill tried not to stare, but it was difficult not to.

"Hello! You must be Mr. Johnson," she smiled enthusiastically, and then looked at Jill. "And you must be Jill. Nice to meet you two! Do you need any help getting settled?"

Jill distinctly shook her head 'no', but her father spoke out, "That would be great!" He was beaming as he stepped out of the van and opened the back door. The woman grabbed Jill's wheelchair, lifted it out of the minivan with ease, and walked it over to her door as it swung ajar. Jill pasted a smile on her face, but it didn't quite extend to her

eyes. She wasn't too sure how she felt about the woman in front of her who kept smiling at her father so intensely.

"Hey, Jill," the lady knelt down, "I'm your trainer, Emily. I'll be helping you with the horses."

At the word "horses", Jill's smile deepened. She had always dreamed about being able to ride. Emily helped Jill into her chair and began to push her towards the barn. The smell of hay, cedar shavings, and manure seemed to engulf her. As they entered the barn with her father following, they stopped at a colorfully decorated stall with the name "Dusty" spelled out in bits and pieces of iron horse shoes. "This will be your horse to care for and ride," Emily said as she reached out and patted the horse's neck. From where she sat, Jill could see her dad watching Emily attentively.

"So where do we start?" Jill's voice shook a little, but her gaze was steady.

"First, there is going to be grooming and mucking the stall." Emily grabbed a knotted rope hanging on the door and fitted it to the horse's head. "This is a halter," she pointed out to Jill. "This is how you lead and control the horse." She said the words like she had rehearsed them a million times. "Now watch out," Emily said sternly as she opened the stall door and led Dusty out. He was golden brown with a black mane and tail.

Jill was surprised to see that Dusty's back was only a little taller than the height of her eyes as she sat in her wheelchair. "He's so short!" she exclaimed, interrupting Emily in the middle of a sentence.

Emily smiled. "Dusty is a Welsh pony," she explained, "and he's the perfect size for you to learn on because you'll be able to reach his back without straining yourself too much." Emily started a big speech on how to groom the horse, but Jill barely heard a word she said. She just kept looking at the creature in front of her and wondering if she could actually follow through with her dream to learn to ride.

She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and remembered the sound of her mother's gentle voice from long before the accident, telling her about the horses she had ridden as a girl. When she opened her eyes, she saw that the horse had edged closer to her. Suddenly, Dusty put his muzzle on her chest and gave her a nudge. Jill's chair began rolling backward, and she grabbed at the wheels, trying to stop before she rolled right into the wall behind her. She gasped.

"It's O.K. He's just saying he likes you," Emily explained. Jill slowly wheeled forward and picked up the brush that Emily held out to her. "Here," the woman said, "hold the brush like this, push firmly against his side, and clean his coat with circular movements. Every minute or so, knock the brush against the side of your chair to clean the dust and loose hair out of it."

Jill moved cautiously at first, but she soon gained confidence as Dusty truly did seem to enjoy the attention. After about fifteen minutes of grooming, her arms were beginning to ache. "This is a lot harder than it looks," she told her dad, who was leaning up against the wall of the barn where he could keep his eyes on Emily as well as his daughter.

"Looks like you're about done anyway," Emily smiled. "Now it's time to learn how to clean the stall."

She showed Jill how to hold the pitchfork and how to push the specially- adapted wheelbarrow into place so she could load it with the soiled bedding lining the stall floor. When her father appeared ready to lend her a hand, Emily pulled him back gently. "Come with me," she said, and the two of them left Jill in the stall to figure out how best to handle her new responsibility.

As Jill bumped around the stall, she could hear her dad's and Emily's voices and occasional quiet laughter coming from the stall next to hers. She was surprised at how hard the work was, but she felt a shock of pride in how good the stall looked when she was done.

When Emily's voice saying, "I think this is good enough," finally came from behind her, Jill sighed in relief and let her aching arms hang by her side.

She could see her dad's grin and could hear the pleasure in Emily's words. "You did a great job, Jill. Next weekend, you'll do the same thing, and when you're ready, I'll introduce you to riding."

As they drove home, Jill's thoughts were filled with images of horses. Although she hadn't yet ridden, she knew she would love it. Dusty's four legs would give her freedom she hadn't felt in years. The anticipation was almost more than she could bear, but she knew that the week would speed by. "Oh, Dad," she grinned, "Thank you so much!"

Jill's words seemed to startle her father out of his own daydreams. He blushed slightly as he flashed a smile at his daughter across the van and admitted, "I'm looking forward to next weekend, too."

1. What was Jill taught to do when she brushed a horse?

- A. Push firmly in a circular motion against his side.
- B. Lean in and work against the side of her chair.
- C. Speak with a gentle voice while using the brush softly.

2. How long did Jill have to wait before she was able to start her new therapy program?
- A. One month.
 - B. One week.
 - C. One day.
3. What most showed how serious Jill was about the horse program after her dad told her she could start it?
- A. She waited anxiously for the day the program would begin.
 - B. She hugged her father with a big smile and told him thanks.
 - C. She learned as much as she could about horses and horse care.
4. Other than her sadness about losing her mom, what was Jill's main problem in this story?
- A. She was bored and unhappy with her physical therapy.
 - B. She wasn't ready to ride horses because of her wheelchair.
 - C. She wasn't strong enough to do what she wanted to.
5. How did Jill get involved with the horse stable program?
- A. She was referred to the program by her current physical therapist.
 - B. She heard about it on the news and asked her dad if she could try it.
 - C. She asked her dad to call her doctor about other therapy programs.
6. How did Jill feel about having to muck out the stall?
- A. She had a hard time figuring out the best way to deal with her new type of workout.
 - B. She was worried the stable work would be too hard because her arms ached from the effort.
 - C. She was proud of how much she'd accomplished and how good it looked when she was finished.

7. What best describes what Jill was like?

- A. She was bored with her physical therapy and was ready to try anything.
- B. She was determined to find something that could make her life better.
- C. She was frustrated that life hadn't turned out the way she expected.

8. Why did Emily give Jill a Welsh pony to work with?

- A. It was gentler than a horse so he'd be easier to work with.
- B. It was small so Jill could reach his back from her wheelchair.
- C. It was small so it would be more fun for a kid to work with.

9. What was the first thing Emily showed Jill at the stable?

- A. The best way to muck out a stall.
- B. How to groom the horses properly.
- C. Which horse she would take care of.

10. Why didn't Jill express how excited she was when she first found out she could do the horse program?

- A. She didn't want to get her hopes too high that the program would work for her.
- B. She didn't want her dad to feel as though he had failed if it didn't work out.
- C. She didn't want her dad to expect much out of her since she was just learning.

11. What had Jill often wished for after the accident?

- A. That she'd died in the accident like her mother rather than be in a wheelchair.
- B. That she wasn't in a wheelchair and didn't have to do physical therapy.
- C. That her dad would give in and let her quit the physical therapy program.

12. What was the main thing Jill learned at the stables after her first visit?

- A. That she was stronger than she thought and could learn to ride.
- B. That she could ride horses just like her mom used to do.
- C. How to take care of horses and get stronger in the process.

- 13. What probably made the horse stable program especially appealing to Jill when she saw it on the news?**
- A. She remembered her mother had talked about riding when she was a child.
 - B. She thought a horse would be a way to get free from her wheelchair.
 - C. She wanted to show her father that she could do anything she wanted.
- 14. What part of her body did Jill need to strengthen with physical therapy?**
- A. Her arms.
 - B. Her back.
 - C. Her legs.
- 15. What activity at the horse stable gave Jill the same exercise she used to get in the physical therapy program?**
- A. Moving in and out of the wheelchair a lot.
 - B. Grooming the horse and cleaning the stall.
 - C. Pushing the specially-adapted wheelbarrow.
- 16. What was the main idea of this story?**
- A. There can be many solutions to your problems.
 - B. If you don't try something new, you'll never succeed.
 - C. It is important to follow your dreams at any cost.
- 17. Why was Jill's dad looking forward to going back to the stable?**
- A. He enjoyed learning more about horses too.
 - B. He found Jill's riding instructor interesting.
 - C. He liked the chance to spend some time outside.
- 18. What is probably the reason Jill was not comfortable with Emily at first?**
- A. She felt that Emily was pushy and wasn't going to let Jill do her own thing.
 - B. Emily was new and unfamiliar, and Jill wasn't sure what her intentions were.
 - C. She was a bit unsure about all the attention Emily was paying to her father.

19. How did the pony react to Jill at first?

- A. He was irritated with her for being too close and pushed her away.
- B. He was frightened of her wheelchair and pushed it against the wall.
- C. He was affectionate towards her and pushed his muzzle into her.

20. How did Jill's dad feel about Jill's situation?

- A. He wanted the best for Jill in health and happiness and kept trying.
- B. He was frustrated with trying to please Jill with therapy programs.
- C. He was sad about the accident and had given up on making Jill happy.