

Finalist, Fiction

## **Dependable Pal: A Pony's Tale**

by Donna Grahmann

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“Passengers needing assistance with boarding on United flight #250, departing for Las Vegas, may now begin boarding at gate #23,” crackles out of the airport loud speaker above our heads. Donna, who doubles as my Mom and handler, takes hold of my harness handle. She follows my lead toward the gateway. As we stroll by, waiting passengers murmur:

“Oh, how cute is that?”

“I can’t believe this!”

“What’s your name?”

The ticket agent reaches over my withers to hand Mom her ticket stub, but I ignore that and focus on the obstacle in front of me. My mission is clear: choose the best path to guide Mom down the slanting jet way and onto the plane, without bumping her into anything.

“Hey, Donna and Pal, it’s Carol; I’m glad to see y’all on my flight again,” said the lead flight attendant, as she rushes past us toward the plane. Her curly blonde pony tail fans out behind her when she whips around the left corner of the jet way.

That’s me, Pal Ca-Pony, guide horse extraordinaire. My 150-pound body packs into a 29-inch frame, from hooves to withers. The summer heat gives me a slick; white coat, but the winter cold makes my coat poof out like a cotton ball with four skinny legs. Mom hand braids my black mane and tail like a show horse, but my leather working harness and guide horse embroidered, blue jean blanket reveal my real purpose.

We met Miss Carol last summer on a flight to Virginia to visit some of Mom's friends. She told me that I was a handsome, well-behaved passenger. I overheard her whisper to Mom as I guided her off the plane in D.C. that she wished all her passengers were like me. Hmmm, maybe Miss Carol should hand out some peppermints.

Turning left at the end of the long jet way to board our flight, I spot the skinny doorway to the plane. Like a barrel horse, I turn in front of Mom to block her from a major fall. My belly takes a stiff bump from her left knee as she freezes in mid-stride. I plant all four of my non-skid tennis shoes on the rubber floor and body block her path. Peering through a wide gap between the jet way and main compartment door, I see a ten foot drop--straight down to the tarmac. She asks me to walk on; but she can't see the danger, danger, danger that flashes like a red beacon ahead of us. My donkey mode takes over when I disobey, lock my knees, and stand firm.

"Nay-nay Winnie Pooh, I'm not taking another step forward."

At almost the same instant, Miss Carol's long legs step over the wide gap and block our path, like she wants to do my job.

"Hello-o-o, guide horse on duty here!"

I make a quarter turn to the right and zip Mom back around the corner of the jet way before Miss Carol can finish asking us to follow her. The gate agent toggles a joystick and the gap vanishes when the extending jet way meets flush with the plane.

On our second approach, I step forward in my custom adapted toddler tennis shoes and pause at the threshold for Mom to feel the doorframe on her right. Three steps forward and a right-hand pivot, lines us up with the center aisle. In single file, I follow Miss Carol to the first

row of seats; and Mom follows me. Like a car making a three-point turn, I back my blue jean bloomers toward the window and into the empty space in front of Mom's seat on the left.

A deep, whispering nicker escapes my lips in anticipation of my favorite treat, while Mom pops a peppermint out of its cellophane wrapper and into my watering mouth. I pose for the clicking cell phone cameras, as passengers file past us to get to their seats. Some passengers laugh, but that doesn't bother me. I just continue to slurp and suck on my delicious peppermint while nodding my head in enjoyment.

My ears flick forward when the cabin door closes and the air pressure changes. The magazine pocket near my right shoulder stretches open; then, snaps tight around my harness handle as Mom tucks it inside for safe keeping. During our plane's taxi down the runway, I feel Mom's shoes wedge against my left shoulder and hip to hold me snug against the wall, like I'm in the squeeze chute at the vet's office. When the plane takes off, our six-pack tennis shoe teamwork springs into action as I lean into the steep upward slant of the floor. I twitch my ears trying to relieve the pressure, but nothing works until I blow out a discrete snort and toot from opposite ends.

"Thank God for Depends underwear," chuckles Mom as I whisper a nicker of approval to another peppermint.

Stepping off the plane in Las Vegas, with Mom's encouragement, I find myself blazing a trail around an endless stream of passenger's legs.

"Whoa," I tell myself when a baby carriage darts across our path, almost shaving the whiskers off my velvet muzzle.

I pick up the scent of rich, sweet alfalfa from the cowboy's black boots and jeans ahead of us; so I follow him outside the airport door, in search of a pony pit stop. Concrete parking lots with

cars in constant rotation, keep me on high alert of passengers arriving and departing. Red rocks of various sizes line the dry, twisting paths of creek beds that shift away from the airport. A skycap assists Mom with directions to a spot with a few mesquite trees; but adds his warning to beware of the patches of belly height, barrel cactus. Instead, as if reading each other's mind, we load up into a mini-van that will take us to our hotel.

Before our van leaves the airport parking lot, I begin to wonder if my Depends will pass the pony piddle test. Our driver spots a cactus free, sandy strip and jockeys the van within a few feet of its outer edge. I rush over to it as soon as Mom slides the door open and our shoes hit the ground. She lifts my right, then left back hooves and removes my Depends in the nick of time. Those dry creek beds may now be flowing.

In less than ten minutes, I lead Mom through the hotel parking lot, out into the sunshine, and along the sidewalk. Walking behind our driver who pulls Mom's green rolling suitcase, I catch a pleasant, but unusual scent that mixes with that of fresh cut grass nearby. Then, our driver pauses to show Mom the small hotel courtyard on our left, with a hidden entrance between two rows of bushes.

We zigzag through the opening and my heart does a happy dance at the site of a big patch of green grass. I tuck my head down for a little nibble, but Mom has a tight hold on my lead rope and stops me before I get a taste of what she calls "chemically treated grass." I paw the ground with my right front shoe to plead with her, but she won't give in. She even stops me from nibbling, while I guide her back through the bushes to the sidewalk. I snort in protest, but go back to work guiding her the last 100 feet to the hotel door.

We walk across the dark marble floor of the huge lobby and I find the check-in counter along the back wall. Boy, am I glad to be wearing my custom tennis shoes on this slick marble floor as visions of Bambi sprawling on ice pop into my mind! The bellhop escorts us to our room on the 35<sup>th</sup> floor and explains the room arrangement to Mom. As soon as he leaves and the door clicks

shut, she goes to work laying plastic over the six-foot hallway carpet between the front door and the closet on the right.

From the front door, I can walk straight down the short hallway into the bedroom or take an immediate left and enter my long, white tile stall and dining room, complete with a feed trough that doubles as a bathtub.

Whoopee-e-e! Off comes my harness and blanket. Next, I step out of my Velcro tennis shoes onto cushy, protected carpet. Then, my bloomers slump down around my back hooves as Mom starts laughing and humming some famous Las Vegas cabaret song. She strips my blue jean bloomers off, but leaves my custom Depends in place. I stare at the handsome horse that magically appears in front of me when Mom folds open the Shiny, glass closet door to hang up my harness. “Hey, where did you come from? You wear custom Depends too?”

His ears flick back and forth just like mine as we both reach our muzzles forward in greeting. His breath smells like we are slurping on the same delicious treat. We breathe in and out to exchange the peppermint scent we share. In unison, we nod to each other and blow a snort to approve of our mutual friendship. My twin poofs away in a foggy haze, as quickly as he had appeared in front of me. I think I like this magic horse.

After I clean up every morsel of my oats and alfalfa, Mom dresses me in my work gear so we can go exploring. When I park myself near the elevator buttons for Mom to locate them, a man staggers out of the elevator as if the farrier set a bad nail in his horseshoe. He freezes with his mouth wide open when our eyes meet. With rapid blinks, hiccups, and a shake of his head toward the ceiling; he then, turns away from us and mumbles that he better go to bed.

We rocket down 35 floors in the elevator and step out into the huge casino with flashing lights, dingy bells, and hoots from people holding jingling cups. Mom tells me to find the door,

so I lead her across the hotel lobby and through the same door we entered this morning. Then, we walk directly outside and to the courtyard on the right. Ah, my hidden, pony pit stop!

As the setting sun dips behind the tall hotel across from us on the Vegas Strip, Mom decides to try a short, 30-minute walk in the cooling temperatures. She lifts the end of my braided tail as we rise up the moving steps of the outdoor escalator; then, I feel the braid swoosh past my hocks when we clear the last step that retracts under the exit platform. I focus on the long, elevated crosswalk to our right and guide Mom straight down the middle and to the other side. She must hear the down escalator we are approaching because she pats her right leg before we reach it. I turn right and stop on the platform as she lets the moving handrail slide under her right hand. The toe of her right shoe slides to the edge and waits to feel the next step as it appears out from under the platform. With her double cluck and forward command, we step onto the down escalator. My front hooves rest securely next to Mom's right foot; and my back hooves are set on the higher step with her left foot. She lets go of the handrail to lift my tail braid as the steps begin to level out. We step off the escalator and my braid brushes across my hocks. We follow along the sidewalk with all the other pedestrians, but we don't have room to avoid stepping in the sticky pink liquid that is dribbling out of the ladies torn grocery bag in front of us. That pink stuff sure smells like peppermints.

When we reach the down-curb at the end of the long sidewalk, I signal Mom with a body block. Turning around, we retrace our path across the elevated walkway and back into our hotel.

Our shoes squeak on the shiny marble floor as we walk through the lobby. I guide her into the casino with all the exciting noises. Mom parks me next to a slot machine that she keeps feeding little coins, but it never gives her any treats back. My eyes start to drift closed until I hear that candy wrapper noise that makes my mouth water. A little nicker escapes as I taste that lumpcious peppermint on my lips.

Mom doesn't know it, but a man wearing a ball cap is standing a few feet behind her and is staring at me. A lady leans over to whisper this to Mom, who then turns to greet the man and ask if she can help him. He says in a voice that sounds familiar to me, that he just can't believe what he is seeing. He asks, without introducing himself, if she would mind if he calls his friend to come down and see this amazing thing. A few more people stop to join the conversation when his friend arrives; and then, I realize whom Mom is talking to. He has the same voice that comes out of our TV at home during Mom's favorite shows.

My ears twitch as I hear my name pop up now and then, but Mom's recent command of "Whoa," keeps me in place, while I suck on my peppermint. The crowd swells around us in a horseshoe pattern. I start to feel like I'm part of a celebrity interview. The man with the familiar voice is the only one asking Mom questions, and they are all about me.

She tells him about my harness, blanket, non-skid shoes, and my peppermint treats; when she starts telling him about my commands and signals, I give him an urgent demonstration. I paw the floor once, twice, and three times to signal Mom that it's time to go. Starting at my withers, her left hand brushes down my blanket to find my harness handle and gathers the slack in my lead rope. Cocking my right ear back, I wait to hear the double cluck from Mom's cheek that tells me to walk on. She says goodbye to everyone, then gives me the signal. The crowd drifts away when the man with the familiar voice disappears through a stage door on the left.

A lady darts from behind me toward Mom as we walk through the casino and into the lobby. She prances around us like she needs to go piddle too.

"Do you know who you were talking to? Howie Mandell!" she exclaims before Mom can reply to her question.

Mom tells her that she is blind and that's why she has me, but she should have recognized Howie's voice from his two TV shows she listens to.

Straight from the horse's mouth, I summarize our day in Las Vegas like this: "Deal or No Deal," guide horses can make a peppermint last or disappear in an instant, and "This Is Howie Do It!"