

# Horse in Boots

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**p 5-12**

## A horse is not a cat

Our house is too small. I walk through the living room with my horse. Lasse's boots thud neatly on the carpet. He doesn't swish his tail against the sofa. He just snuffles at the shelf of cactuses. All the same, dad's unimpressed.

'Fieke, what were you thinking? Get that beast out of here!' he growls. He's jumped up from his armchair and dropped his newspaper.

A horse in boots, he's never seen such a thing. A horse has metal horseshoes or white socks, but certainly not boots! And in his own living room too?

Yes, Lasse wears boots. Beautiful supple leather boots with red laces and thick rubber soles. Just the right size for his tender hooves.

Cautiously I lead Lasse through the room between the coffee table and the bookshelf. Dad stays safely behind the sofa. If Lasse starts swaying, he'll knock all the books onto the floor with his backside. And Lasse does like swaying from side to side. Hour after hour. But fortunately right now he's not swaying. He's well brought up, my new pet.

We pass the TV and the cabinet without breaking anything. Meanwhile dad grumbles that this really is impossible (but it is possible, because I'm doing it right now).

'Have you gone completely mad? A horse in the house...'

Lasse shuffles to the kitchen on his stiff legs.

Click-clack go the boots on the tiles.

He doesn't even look at the basket of apples on the counter.

Clickety-clack to the back door.

Lasse places his nose on the handle. He learnt that from old Olga. He pushes the door open and lumbers outside.

He stands there among the flowerpots full of forget-me-nots and bleeding hearts on the patio: my own horse. It's a morning in May and the sun is shining on the curve of his back. Lasse's coat is grey with spots as big as apples. His white forelock hangs down over his scrawny Icelandic snout.

Of course I know a horse has a nose, not a snout. That might be true of most horses. But not Lasse. He's much too pig-headed for a nose.

My horse doesn't need teaching anything. He's nearly thirty years old. Three zero.

But there's still plenty of life in him.

I fill a bucket with water. Lasse slurps it up greedily.

Dad opens the door. Red-faced he stands on the threshold.

'Are you going to tell me what's going on here?'

'Yes,' I say. I always say yes when I'm asked a question, it generally saves a load of fuss.

'Well?'

'First let me introduce you. This is Lasse.'

Gently I pat Lasse's broad shoulder. He stops drinking and shakes the droplets from his chin.

'Look buddy, this here's my dad.'

Fortunately Lasse is used to people not being nice to him. Before Olga rescued him, he worked at a circus. He walked on his hind legs and trotted round the ring with a clown on his back. He even had to jump through a ring of fire.

Dad puts his hands on his hips. He's about to say something but changes his mind. Some people have trouble talking. My father has trouble thinking.

He swallows again, takes a deep breath.

'A horse is not a cat,' he says.

Yeah, even a baby knows that, right?

So I just say, 'Yes. Nor a dog either.'

At that point the horse starts peeing. I jump aside to avoid the splashes. My nose prickles with the stench.

Dad gives me one more piercing look.

'Get that beast out of here immediately!' he shouts. The door slams shut.

Lasse's trembling. I stroke the poor old softy on the head and sing a song close to his ear. Olga taught me that that calmed him down.

'Row, row, row your boat gently down the stream...'

A few minutes later the back door opens a crack. Dad sticks his head out. Lasse looks the other way.

'Fieke, what I really don't understand...' Dad does his best to sound as normal as possible. Perhaps he realises he hasn't been very friendly to Lasse. 'Where on earth did you find a horse in boots?'

## **Olga's ramshackle cottage**

Of course I wanted a horse. Everyone wants a horse, don't they? To groom and to ride once in a while. Trotting through the woods. To whisper things in its ear that you could never say to a human being.

But I hadn't expected it to happen so quickly. I didn't even have to beg and plead.

We live in a little terraced house in the middle of town. Number 37 Brush Street. There's a front door and one window facing the street. Where can I put a horse of my own around here? We don't even have a proper garden, just a patio with flowerpots and a tray of herbs. There are walls up to an adult's head height on all sides.

Behind the left-hand wall Mosi sits talking to himself all day. To the right the Berks family kids make such a mess it even makes me feel sick.

At the back we have a shed. Well, it's really more of a box, because there's only room for three folding garden chairs and a table.

Behind the garden shed is another bit of wall. I don't know who lives there. They're always as quiet as a mouse in any case. I think the house is probably empty. Or perhaps there's someone lying dead on the floor.

Forgotten by everyone.

My father's right: there's no room for a horse in our house. Not even a mini-pony who barely comes up to your tummy button. But I have one all the same. A real Icelandic horse. Given to me by Olga just before she died. But it didn't just happen overnight.

Every afternoon I cycle home from school along Elm Tree Avenue. That's where Olga's cottage is, on the side of the street with the colossal trees. It's whitewashed and ramshackle, as if it might fall down at any moment, just like Olga. Pink and blue flowers grow in thick clumps around the door. Early hydrangeas and lilacs whose scent makes you gasp for breath.

When I saw Olga for the first time, she'd tied a shopping basket onto Lasse's back. I was so busy looking at his boots that I bumped into the curb. I fell sprawled on the ground. The horse turned his nose in my direction, startled (yes, at the time I still thought Lasse had a nose, not a snout).

Olga helped me up and cleaned my grazed knee. There was a hole as big as a coin in it.

That was the first time she gave me coffee.

Later Olga told me you don't make friends, you come across them. They cross your path at the moment you least expect them. Precisely as she'd found me, on her doorstep with a grazed knee.

Since that afternoon I'd cycled past every day. I leant my bike against the fence and walked along a narrow path to the back of the house. There's a stream with frogs and a weeping willow whose branches reach the water.

As soon as he heard me, Olga's horse would saunter across the paddock to the wooden stable. He'd poke his curious snout through the top of the door and stare at me.

Lasse can give you such a pitiful look that even the biggest freak would stroke him. I just had to go over to him. I put my hands on his cheeks and scratched him under the chin.

Lasse sighed with pleasure. Because of me and the lovely feeling I gave him.

Olga was glad I gave her horse attention. Her 'pig-headed little devil', she called him. She asked me to groom him and taught me to look after his wounded hooves. I gave him fresh water because a full bucket was too heavy for Olga. I dug up carrots in the vegetable garden and every day I mucked out the stable.

I did all of it for Olga.

And for Lasse.

But perhaps most of all for myself.

There's nothing more fun than scratching mud out of a horse's coat.

After the work in the stable I'd pull up a stool to sit at the table with Olga. The kitchen smelt of bread and there were strings of garlic hung up to dry. The ceiling was full of holes from woodworm and in strong winds it creaked like a ship in a storm.

I sat on a three-legged stool. If I leant too far to one side, I crashed to the floor.

Olga gave me coffee and stale biscuits from a tin. She knew I didn't like coffee but she still gave me a mugful every day.

One day I'd learn to drink it, she said.

Olga was just as pig-headed as her horse.

When Olga chewed on a biscuit, her false teeth sometimes came loose. She'd try to push them back into place with her tongue.

'It'sh all shuch a faff,' she'd mumble, with two fingers in her mouth.

I'd pretend not to notice and blow waves in the coffee.

Olga was dying. I'd known it for some time. As long as I'd known her, really. I hated the idea of it. What if she fell down dead like that, with her fingers in her mouth? Or out of fright when I put the mug down too hard on the table?

'Oh but you're dying too, you know,' she said once. 'Not as fast as me, but it's on its way.'

I was shocked and choked on a bit of biscuit. I coughed until there were tears in my eyes. Olga beat my back with one hand. Quite roughly for someone at death's door.

'Quiet, girl. You don't have to go now.'

I tried to smile and brushed the crumbs from my trousers.

Olga was right. Everyone dies sometime. She always said things everyone knew but never said out loud. From her it sounded almost reassuring.

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## Wrinkle butterflies

You know why I think old people are so beautiful? They have butterflies on their faces. If you look long enough, you can see them. There, between the lines and cracks around the eyes and mouth, an insect is sleeping. A butterfly made of creased paper. Sometimes you can hear it rustling under the wrinkly skin.

There are happy butterflies and sad butterflies. Exuberant butterflies and grouchy ones. Greedy ones and picky ones. Night-time ones and lazy ones.

The older you get, the more beautiful the butterfly.

Until one day he feels the sun tickling his back. Curiously he pokes up his little head. The antennae wave in the wind. He stretches his legs, flaps his wings free, and after a deep sigh he rises.

Heading for a new summer.

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## The promise

Yesterday I saw Lasse dance for the first time. It was the last time too, because the only person he dances with is Olga.

They only did it when Lasse himself asked to. He took a couple of playful steps and nuzzled Olga to do the same.

I'd gone to the kitchen for some fruit juice. When I came back outside, they'd already started.

Lasse had asked Olga to dance. She was happy to oblige.

Lasse carried on stamping rhythmically on the spot, as if trotting briskly, but without moving forward.

Olga opened her arms outwards. A shudder travelled from one hand, over her shoulders to the fingertips on the other side. She stretched her bent back as well as she could. She pushed her head forward, elongating her neck like a crane. Then she took a few steps to one side and back again.

Lasse turned around Olga, while she signalled the rhythm with her undulating arms. First slowly, then faster and faster.

She raised her arms high in the air. Lasse stood on his hind legs and made a little leap.

Olga was enjoying the dance, swaying to inaudible music.

Lasse moved close to Olga. Nose to nose they began to sway. It was the slowest dance I've ever seen, but the most beautiful too.

Two ancient bodies drawing circles in the grass.

Olga shuffled and Lasse lumbered.

It was stiff and wobbly. But they were dancing. They danced together like I've never seen two people dance.

When Lasse raised a front leg, Olga did the same with her arm. When she made a simple waltz step, Lasse waltzed along with her.

She knew, I now believe. Olga knew then that she would die very soon. That she would have to leave everything behind: her house, the paddock, the bench among the flowers, Lasse's cheerful neighing and my daily visit.

After that dance something had changed.

We brought Lasse to the stable and stayed with him while he ate some horse feed.

Olga's fingers gripped my hand. Her skin was like cardboard. She gripped harder than usual. As if she wanted to hang onto me.

'You're the only person who understands Lasse,' she mumbled.

'He won't dance with me,' I said.

'You know the misery he's been through.'

I looked up at Olga's sunken cheeks and her sharp nose. There was something strange in her look, something warm yet intangible. The wrinkle butterfly was more beautiful than ever.

'When I took him from the circus, he was lame and skittish as a grasshopper. His ears lay flat. He was scared to death of me.'

'But you got him back on his feet, Olga,' I said. 'You gave him a stable and straw.'

'It was more than a year before he was able to walk normally again.' She squeezed my fingers delicately.

'Thanks to the boots,' I said.

'That's true,' she smiled. 'Without his boots he wouldn't have made it.'

Olga pulled off the heavy boots as she did every evening. She got Lasse to raise his feet one by one, took a cloth and wiped his hooves clean, spitting on the fluffy material and rubbing until the hoof wall shone like a chestnut. Then with her fingertips she massaged the sensitive hoof sole.

A tremor ran through Lasse's coat. Not fear, but pleasure.

'Lasse is a very special horse. And you know exactly what he needs.'

Olga put the boots in a row in a corner of the stable. She stood right in front of me looking very serious.

'When I'm not around anymore, you have to look after him,' she said. 'Will you do that for me?'

'Yes!' I said. Of course I said yes, even if there was a little stone in my throat.

'I want him to stay with you, whatever happens.'

'I promise.' I tried to swallow the stone, but it wouldn't budge.

'He's yours then,' Olga repeated. 'Don't give him to anyone else. Not even the kindest man in the world.'

'You can count on me,' I said, but I don't know if she heard me, because she began to cough violently.

Olga had a bigger stone in her throat.