

Past Parents

I like Marmaduke, but she gets scared easily.

When she was introduced to us at Uncle Peter and Auntie Diane's farm, she bucked because a bird landed on a post next to her as if it was a monster and would swallow her whole. She's fared a lot better since then and is not as jumpy now that she's been in the stables with the other animals for a few months. She doesn't even flinch when Gab fastens the saddle.

I'm not as old as Gab but I'm as tall as her. This week she said I'd be able to ride Marmaduke as long as I promised not to mess it up.

Uncle Peter and Auntie Diane have always lived on the farm, even before we came to live with them. We've visited a few times each year since I was little, so I already had an idea what it was like here. I just hadn't thought it was ever going to be my home.

The hills behind the house and the lake on the other side meant it had good chi, Gab said, so we would be looked after here even without Mum and Dad.

"Gab?"

"Henry."

"Gab, where do you think our parents are now?"

Gab put her hands on her hips after brushing Marmaduke's hair and stared down the track she had recently ridden along near the lake. "Mum and Dad aren't coming back, but Uncle Peter and Auntie Diane are making a home for us here. Mum and Dad would be happy we were living with them, don't you think?"

I nodded. "But when they died in the fire, do you think they went somewhere else?"

"I don't know."

Gab turned back to Marmaduke and continued brushing her hair. Marmaduke snorted and stamped her feet.

Gab said she liked getting her hair brushed and that when she stamped like that, it was the same as a dog wagging its tail.

Marmaduke walked over to me and nuzzled my head and shoulder, which she had never done before. She was ready for me to ride her, I was sure of it.

"Go and get ready so we don't miss the bus."

The sun was fully up and we both needed to get ready for school. I packed up the food I had been using to feed the animals and walked back to the house. I was ready when the bus beeped, although still had to run to make it.

We have kids of all different ages in our classes, not just my age like when we lived in Glen Waverley. I don't miss that school, but I miss my friends. I don't think I like school as much as my sister does. Gab does a lot of maths, but I like writing, which often turns into pictures of rocks and the big cactus out the front of our home. I still don't like calling Uncle Peter and Auntie Diane's place our home. I want Mum and Dad back.

I caught the earlier bus home from school so I could check on Marmaduke. I brushed her down like Gab had done, and she stamped her feet. She also nuzzled me again. If I was ever going to ride her then this was it. Gab wasn't around and Marmaduke really liked me. Gab would be so proud if I was able to make Marmaduke like it when I rode her.

The dogs barked from the moment I put on the saddle to when I mounted her. Marmaduke did not buck or anything, so I was sure she would stay calm.

We started off with a slow trot, then a canter. Any faster and even if Gab was here to help me, I'd be scared of falling off.

"Alright, Marmaduke, thanks for being calm, but I want to go home now." The old mare turned as if she knew what I had said and started off home. The bus came around the corner just as I slowed Marmaduke to a complete stop. Gab stepped off the bus and stopped when she saw I was riding Marmaduke, then ran toward me.

"You get off Marmaduke right now. Get off!"

I shrugged while Marmaduke seemed to laugh at Gab's annoyance.

The bus beeped its horn and Marmaduke shivered while moving a few steps forward. I righted myself on Marmaduke so I didn't slip off, just in case she was so scared that she wanted to trot further away from the road.

"Marmaduke, I want to get off now."

The mare took off, speeding up to a canter.

"Slow down! Stop!"

She galloped, going around the giant cactus three times, then down the track we had trotted along before. I forgot everything Gab told me about how to make a horse stop and calm down. I could hear her screaming from somewhere as she ran toward us, so I knew she had forgotten everything too. She did tell me to hold on, which I was doing anyway, but it wasn't enough, because I was falling off to one side.

The horse turned sharply and ran for the lake. The dogs barked again, but faded away as we got further ahead, and so did Gab's voice. I turned to check to see how far I had gone, but I must have forgotten to hold onto the reins, because then I was on my side being dragged along in the dry dirt.

"Henry, Henry, you're awake!" Gab said.

I opened my eyes. Gab was crying. I don't know why. Maybe she was thinking about Mum and Dad again, the same as when I'd seen her in bed late at night. She doesn't cry aloud, just with tears running down her cheeks.

"Hi Gab," I said.

"Wait, wait, stay awake."

"Okay, I will."

Gab ran out the door and yelled something that I could not understand. I was not in my bed or my room, or any room that was at our auntie and uncle's, unless I hadn't seen every room yet. Although that would mean they had a hidden door, because Gab and I had played hide-and-seek in every room and cupboard in that old place. I looked up at the TV over my bed. Nothing was on it. I couldn't keep my eyes open, so I blinked, but then I think they stayed closed.

This time when I woke, Gab was lying on the bed next to me. She normally didn't like it when I slept with her on her bed. Although sometimes I would sneak into her room when I heard her sniffing back tears, and it would help her stop when she felt me next to her. Well, most of the time it worked, but she would still be angry with me in the morning when she woke and found me there.

There was a Rubix cube on the bed. She was terrible at it, so I fixed it for her. Then I was so tired I needed to sleep again.

I felt even more tired when I woke this time. Gab wasn't on the bed and there was no one else in the room. I don't know why, but I started to cry. I wasn't even thinking about Mum and Dad this time.

A woman came inside and said she would get a doctor and that I should try to keep my eyes open. I managed to do so this time, but as the doctor came inside it was really hard to stay awake.

"Henry, Henry. Can you hear me?"

I nodded, but I think my eyes were closed at the time.

"Henry, I need you to stay awake, can you help me with that. I promise you'll get ice cream afterward, your sister said your favourite is rainbow, right?"

I forced my eyes open and saw the doctor smiling down at me. And he wasn't joking, the ice cream was behind him on the table. I couldn't help but grin.

"Okay, great, I'll put in three scoops for you and two for me. Now, can you wiggle your toes for me?"

I nodded and did so. The doctor nodded too. He then did something under the blanket to my foot, but I didn't feel it.

"Okay, thanks Henry. Any headaches or other pain?"

I shook my head.

"Everything else feels okay? No numbness, especially in the legs?"

"No, just tired and hungry."

The doctor laughed, "You've earned your ice cream." The doctor handed me my bowl. "Eat up before it melts. So tell me, what do you do when you're not riding horses?"

With ice cream filling my mouth, I said "I help on the farm. I'm not sure I want to be a farmer, but my uncle said I could be if I wanted to. I like Writing at school, but I don't really enjoy the other subjects. I like playing, but I don't play sport."

The doctor patted me on the leg, but I didn't feel it even though he was doing it pretty hard. I started to feel sleepy again, so I closed my eyes, but wondered if I was allowed to have more ice cream.

Gab and my uncle and auntie visited often until I was free to go home. I recovered quicker than the doctors thought I would and was able to go to school after six weeks. It was hard getting used to a wheelchair, but Gab helped a lot.

"Professor?" A student I didn't know held up his hand. He must have transferred after the semester. "You mentioned that the ratio is equal to x , does that mean . . ."

I smiled and waited for the new student to finish his question, who was only trying to show his interest in the subject. My own sudden interest in maths and problem-solving had come about after my accident. I've thought about it a lot over the years following that day, and I don't think it was because of a conscious effort to change things or the depression that was supposed to follow and never came after being told I wouldn't walk again.

My sister was always there for me while I got used to not being able to walk. We even lived together for a time. It was sad when she died while giving birth. The child survived and so I had been given a nephew, but lost a sister. I also gained a student to teach who I love and want to watch grow into a man. The father drank too much and never recovered, deciding to return to China and be with his parents who said they would make sure he got the help he needed. I feel bad for him, but I think Gab's son lost the most after suddenly not having any parents around. Something I can relate to.

Gab's son is smart. Real smart. He's ten and he's already beaten me twice at chess. He writes, but he also loves maths, maybe he will become the person I could have been. I hope so. I want to give him everything that Gab would have wanted for him. We are family and all we have left in this world.