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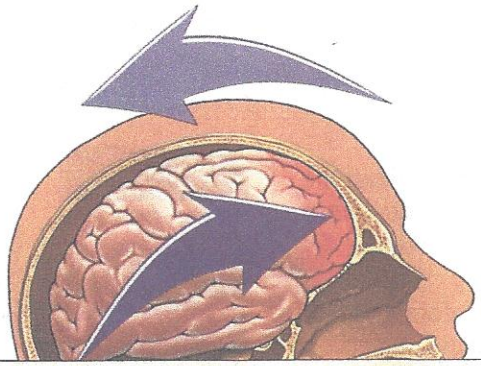
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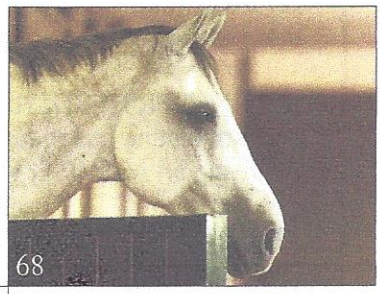
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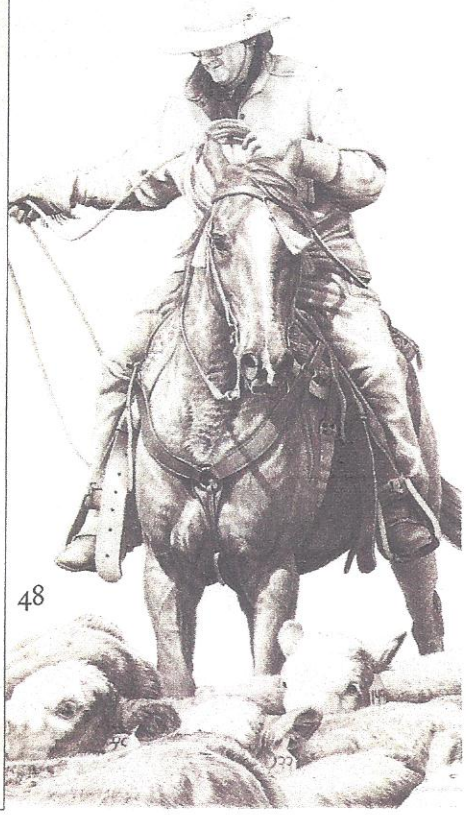
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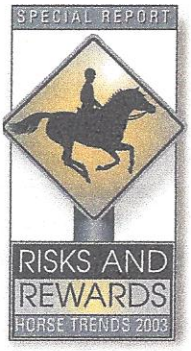


By Elizabeth B. Herman

As she slowly recovers from a serious fall, a woman draws strength from the horses and people she loves.

May 3, 2000

It's my first lesson on the white-faced Paint Testa, and I walk him around the sunny arena on loose reins, admiring the swing of his shoulder. Stroking his red neck and flaxen mane, I get the same rush I felt at 7 when my neighbor lifted me up on her big, red horse in a bright, dusty barn, and I realized riding was my reason to live.

Today, the sand is soft underfoot and the forest keeps the ring shadowy cool. My friend Connie trots by on her horse. "Your new Paint is cute! What's he done?" I like it that no one's seen Testa yet. I plan to show him in hunter classes at Bainbridge in two weeks.

I take up the reins and ask for a trot. Testa takes big, lazy steps. I apply my inside heel and cluck, keeping a feel on the outside rein. He whooshes forward, propelling me into posting. I am flying, grinning.

My trainer, Jennifer, has set up a gymnastic exercise of jumps tightly spaced. I steer Testa into the line at a nice forward trot. He jumps the first X and canters on. The next two jumps feel great. On the fourth, we go way up; I don't remember coming down.

I'm on my back, the earth heaving beneath me. My skull grinds in sand.

An ocean roars in my ears and I taste rusted pennies. When my helmet is lifted off, my head goes with it. I can't feel my legs. I scream, "Am I all right? Am I all right?" No one will answer me. So I scream more.

Still that salty, metallic taste. "Am I all right?" I'm convinced they won't answer me because I am paralyzed, and they know that if I find out, I will die. I can't feel myself thrash.

Then a horse stamps and clears its nose and a familiar hand takes mine. These things give me strength to hold onto my mind when the medics tie me down. The earth drops when they lift me into the ambulance. Then I am lying on my back in a roaring chamber jolting at rocket speed. The board I'm on shifts, sending cattle-prod shocks down my neck.

Jennifer grounds me here. I ask what happened and she says I fell off Testa. The world is spinning gray and sharp pains course my neck. I keep a death grip on Jenn's hand.

"Jenn, are you here?"

"Yes, I'm here."

A few seconds later, "Jenn! Are you here?"

She squeezes my hand. "I'm right here, Beth."

The ambulance merges into traffic, lights whirling, siren shrieking.

"Jennifer! Are you here?"

"Yes, sweetie."

The driver says, "She'll ask you that 30 times before we get there. It's normal for head injuries."

The bare facts: I fell from a horse and lost consciousness for 20 minutes. I was taken to a local emergency room, then airlifted to a trauma center. My brain sustained a bruise and I fractured one of the vertebrae at the base of my neck.

I sustained what is known as mild traumatic brain injury (TBI). But there's nothing mild about it for me. My fall knocked out all sense of time, place and order. This is hard on someone who manages 13 staff and 100 clients with high energy, schedules oil changes months in advance, hangs blouses by sleeve length and color, and alphabetizes the spice rack. I'm neat–some might say controlling–and brain injury is a mess.

Now, more than a year later, I need a coherent story about the brain injury that took me out of work for three months and changed my life for longer still. I cobble one together from what others tell me. Everyone says I was lucky.

People ask what happened. I will never really know why I came off that horse. My friend Kathleen says Testa overjumped the last fence and then bucked. Jenn thinks I blacked out before falling, because I'm too tight on a horse to go off from one buck, and I didn't try to catch myself. Everyone saw me fly off his rump like a cowboy shot through the heart and land on my head. My helmet split like an egg; the kid cleaning stalls across the barnyard said the crack was so loud, he thought a horse had smacked a jump.

FOCAL POINT: "I have stayed sane counting the days until I can get back on a horse," the author told her doctor. Here, she gets acquainted with her new mount, Classic Driver, three months after her injury.

Amid all the confusion, only one thing is clear. I will jump again.

My first days in the hospital are a blur. I drift through purple depths pierced by beeps bright as lightning. I thrash against ropes, tasting ether and steel. (They tied me to the bed in the ICU because I kept pulling out my I.V. and trying to get up. I didn't know I couldn't walk.) Strange faces float by. They are asking me the same questions over and over again. "Do you know where you are, Elizabeth?"

"No."

"Do you know why you are here?"

"No."

"Do you know what day it is?"

"Monday? Friday? I don't know. Why does this guy keep taking my blood?"

Blood glucose levels plummet after a brain injury. The brain consumes a vast number of calories while it repairs itself, and they had to make sure I didn't use up my reserves. They also had to monitor the levels of Dilantin, the antiseizure drug dripping into my veins.

My boyfriend, Terry, became my memory, tracking who came to the hospital, gifts they brought, and doctors' advice. As dean of the college where I am the head fundraiser, he works long weeks. Each of the five days I was hospitalized, he drove 40 miles to join me in the morning, stayed till four, drove home to fix his son dinner, then returned to stay with me until 10. He said I was calmer when he was there. I drifted in and out, people came and went, and I forgot them within minutes–but I could always feel the change when, to make room for a visitor, he moved from the chair by my side.

My fifth day in the hospital, they have stopped the painkillers and my fog has burned off. My tongue's a salt flat. I feel tiny in bed as a bustling medical team surrounds me.

A small woman asks about my house, the number of steps to the bathroom, and who will be there to help. I panic. I live alone. The doctor says I will have to move to the rehab wing for two weeks, and I feel my bed sink through the floor.

"No! I can't stay here!" I try to sit up slowly, but it's too fast. The room yaws. The bedside congregation swoops off at an angle out of my vision. White coats streak the ceiling. I close my eyes and breathe. When I open them slowly, the people are right side up. I swallow acid and try to fix my gaze on my gentle giant nurse in pink pajamas. "I'm not moving anywhere. I need to go home."

"But Elizabeth," says the doctor, "your high-level balance is damaged and it will take a lot of work to stabilize you. You can't trust your memory or judgment. You can't live alone."

Thank God Terry arrived because my only remaining strategy was to lie back and wail. They agreed to send me home with him until my friend Janice arrived. If my physical therapy and speech consults went all right, I was sprung. They say no one can know the contracts between two people. Terry sealed ours that day.

The next morning a lean, dour physical therapist gives me cotton pants and a robe, wraps a wide strap around my waist, and stands me up.

The linoleum lurches. With her help, I wobble down the hall, but I flunk the drunk test. I can't walk a straight line, touch my nose with eyes closed or stand

on one foot. "You should be much worse," she says as if riding horses is a felony.

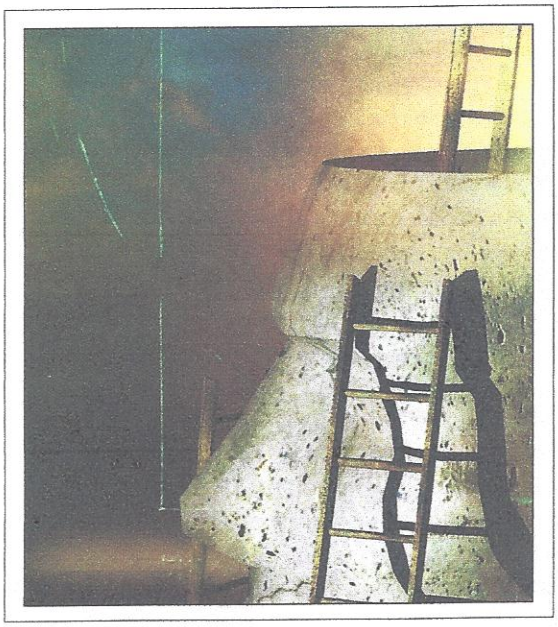
Later in the day I meet my speech therapist, Sommer Kleweno, a beautiful blonde woman with an athletic build and direct approach.

I sense she's a horsewoman before she says so. She'll be my rehab coordinator.

Sommer reads a short article and asks me to recall it. "Quicksand is not as dangerous as most people think. It will support the weight of a man or horse. If you are caught in quicksand, you should spread out, and try to float on top of it, as you would on water. Then you should pull, slowly and steadily, to loosen your feet. If you struggle, a vacuum is formed, which pulls you down."

Brain injury is like quicksand. You slowly pull yourself out.

I can't walk a straight line, touch my nose with eyes closed or stand on one foot. "You should be much worse," says the physical therapist, as if riding horses is a felony.



When they release me, I find myself in an alien world.

I used to jump up in the morning; now it takes forever to open my eyes.

My visual field is milky white film on a broken projector, jittering back and forth, grainy fast, until the bile rises and my eyes swim.

Thinking of quicksand, I try to lie still in the bed. My mind fires images, smells and sensations from random points in my life as neurons restart. I taste roast beef and gravy and want my mother, who's been dead for two years. Starbursts batter the red-rimmed darkness behind my lids. Slow breaths can still the bed, but any stirring triggers the barrel roll or nosedive again.

They call it cognitive fatigue; I have to write even the simplest things down. I need limits and naps and someone around to enforce them. Fatigue leads to irritability and outbursts, and any noise or stimulus is hard to take. Like a horse spooking at a stump by the trail, I react to the tiniest things. I understand Thoroughbreds better now. That stump really might eat you.

June

People ask what I do all day, and I infer judgments. I'm sure they are wondering why I'm still off work. I must justify my time off, but I don't want people to know how bad it is. If I let on how poorly my mind works right now, I fear they will always suspect my brain. They keep saying, "You look great!"

This is the perfect illness for someone vain. I have all my hair and no scars. Medication has made me whip thin. Other than the fact that my pupils change size erratically and I cry at nothing, I do look good. Unfortunately, I'm also a moody shrew.

What do I do? I live like an animal. Sleep when I'm tired, graze when I'm hungry, stare into space for hours. I talk on the phone, telling the story over and over and over again to my deep well of friends. I can't read because the letters dance on the page.

Everyone says I am lucky I didn't die. I wonder how I will live.

My physical therapist is a reedy, serious man named Jim. Soft-voiced, he warns me our work will be hard. "In regular rehab, the muscle or joint protests but the brain presses on. When you're relearning balance, the brain protests with dizziness and nausea. You will feel like you are regressing, but you will be making progress."

He has me step up on a thick foam pad and taps me side to side with two fingers. I stand strong. "Now close your eyes." I careen in the rosy dark, and when he taps me, stumble off the pad. "That's mild impairment. It's like slamming a rifle on the ground–your scope is broken." I start to cry. "We have to retrain your internal balance or your compass will always be off." That won't work in my sport.

I lie on my back on a table with my head over the edge while Jim cradles my skull in his hands to keep it level. Then he lowers my head so it's upside down and turns it right, which is bearable, then left, which is bad. The world shifts and reshifts like crazy. Panicking, I sit

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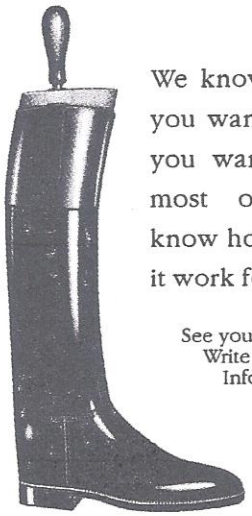
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up and hold my head in my hands as the room dips and spins.

"Tell me if you have to throw up. I'm sorry, but we have to do the left side again so I can watch your eyes." They skitter; they can't hold. How will I walk to the car?

Jim gives me gaze stabilization exercises to practice at home. It sounds simple to stare at a black dot taped to the wall and stand on one foot; easy to walk straight down the hall with eyes closed, arms extended. These exercises reduce me to angry tears for weeks because I keep falling down. Slowly, I retrain my brain.

Weeks later, Jim asks me to walk straight down a long, bright corridor. It is like riding down the quarter-line of an arena on a wiggly, green horse. I can't force my body. I have to settle into straightness by picturing it in my mind. "Don't look at the jump, ride a straight track across it," my trainer says when I confront a spooky ditch. This is how I rebuild my scope.

July

I'm sitting in my doctor's office. Shy behind glasses, he's neurologist Adam West.

"Do you remember me?"

"You're not who I expected."

He smiles. "I saw you every day in the hospital, but you were pretty stunned." He clips maps of my brain to a fluorescent panel. "The small white patches measure density, so we can track the resolution of the subdural blood, but we can't really know what is going on in the brain. It's looking at you–your affect, your eyes–that makes me know you'll be all right." I have so little to show for my colossal crack on the head.

Then we sit, and he shifts his tone. My injury was serious and I am lucky to be alive, he tells me. If I hit my head again within a year, I could die. He moves his face inches from mine. "Do you remember the talk we had about your riding?"

"If you bruise your brain again within some window of time, you could die instantly," the doctor says, "or experience permanent brain damage."

"No, I've conveniently forgotten that." I show him my PT's release instructions, which say, "No riding horses for six weeks," and my calendar with this Wednesday circled. I plan to borrow Jenn's school horse.

He says this is not the PT's call. He doesn't want me to ride for a year.

I sink in my chair. Then I sit up. "My book on TBI says depression is an ongoing threat."

"Yes, it is."

"Well, I have stayed sane by counting the days until I can get back on a horse. I need to ride."

"If you bruise your brain again within some window of time, you could die instantly or experience permanent brain damage. We don't know exactly what that window is, but conservatively it's one year. Possibly six months."

When I won't give up, my doctor says softly, "You are young. You have recovered so well. Why jeopardize that? Think of your family and friends. They have a stake in this, too."

I hesitate for Terry.

"I need another option."

The doctor sighs. "You should not jump for a year–six months at least. In the interim, what is the safest riding you could do?"

Within a week, I swing up on an old school horse and walk around the ring.

August

Jennifer asks me to go see a great little jumper. "We've known him for years. If you like him, you can lease him as long as you want." My friend Cathy takes me. Before I even get out of the car, I tell Classic Driver's trainer about my brain injury and how I need a safe horse. She says he is bombproof–he teaches kids to jump.

In the barn waits a bright-eyed, chestnut Quarter Horse, no more than 15.1 hands. A dark stripe lines his back. I walk up and touch Driver's arched, chess-piece neck. He bends his knees and bows low, holding the pose while I find a carrot. I finger a deep dent in his shoulder where the hair grows in a whorl. The trainer says it's a birthmark, a Prophet's Thumb.

I feel safe on Driver's short, broad back. He is square, balanced, consistent–everything I am not. His trot is a fancy, swinging groove; he makes tidy circles when I just think "turn."

We take a short trail walk and Driver looks around, swinging his tail. When kids approach on dirt bikes, he stays relaxed. The trainer writes up the lease as I stroke Driver's shoulder, laying my palm on that curious dent.

Legend says that the prophet Mohammed kept his herd of 200 wonderful Arabian mares away from water until they were very thirsty. When he freed them from their yards, they galloped toward the water a mile away. He called them to return to him, and of the 200, just five turned back without drinking. These he pressed with his thumbprint, to show how precious they were.

October

Nearly six months after my fall, it's the Woodbrook Hunter Trials. Forty horses are competing, most braided, many fine, and I am surprised how many people know Driver. The announcer is an old guy working from the bed of a truck.

It's my first competition back and everyone wishes me well. I register for three classes; Jennifer cautions me to learn the courses one at a time. First is a flat class with three little jumps. Driver feels fresh, so I keep a choke-hold on the reins. He

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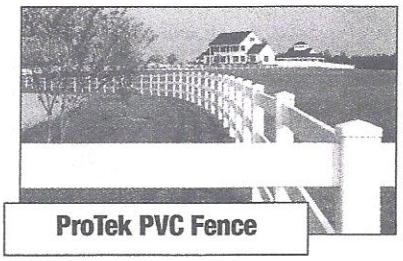
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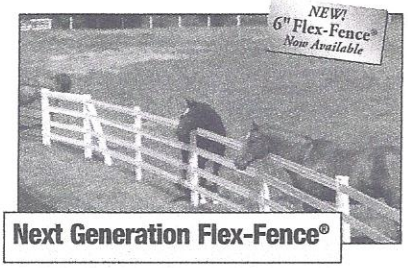

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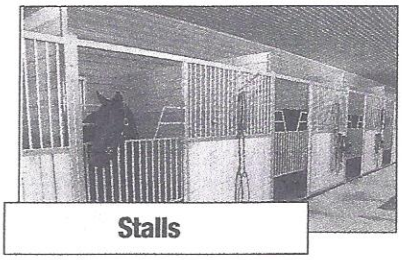
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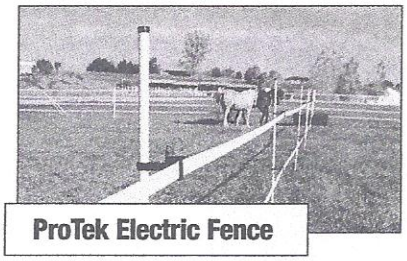
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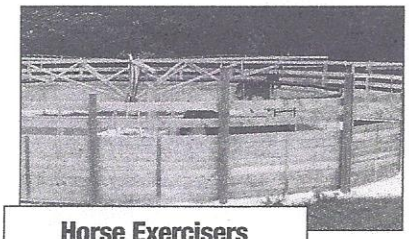
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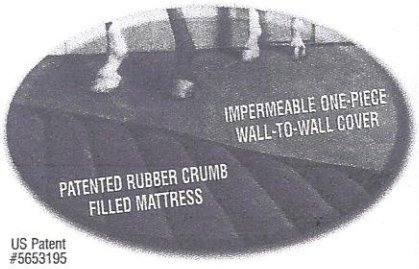

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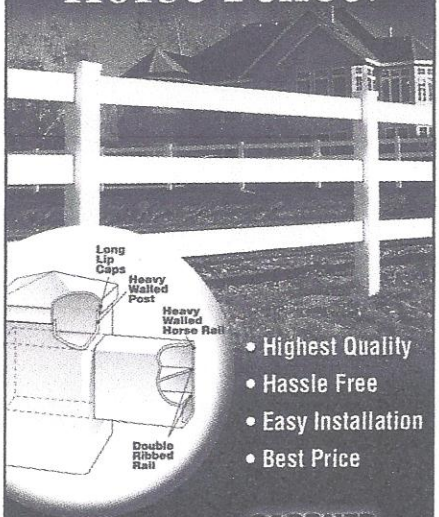

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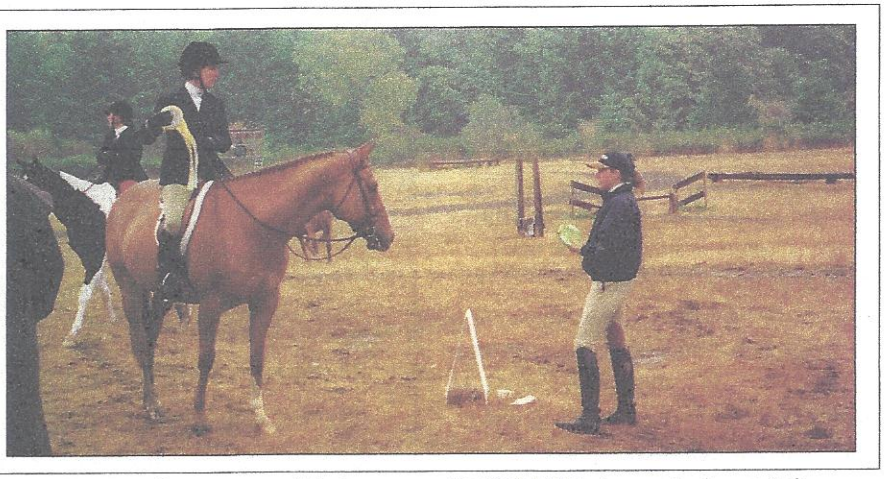

PROGRESS: In an early class at their first show together, the author and Driver earned a ribbon. Another less tangible achievement would come later in the day.

jumps cleanly and moves so well that we get a ribbon.

The longer, second course takes forever to memorize. Then Jenn comes to tell me they have changed the order of classes and I have to do the third course next. Not only have I not looked at it, but it's twisty and they are starting now. I say I will scratch my entry. Jenn says, "Do you want to end the day like that?" I know she's right, but I fear looking bad. I look at the course five more times and try to run through it in my head, and then they call my number and Jenn legs me up and I'm off.

"There goes Beth," says my friend Kate. "What's she got in her hand?"

Connie gapes. "Oh no, that's her course map!" My friends link arms and stare out at the field.

I know the first three jumps, so I pick up a canter and head out across the sandy grass. Approaching the first log, I clutch the reins and try to choose Driver's number of strides. I get it wrong, but he doesn't stop. He springs over.

Going away, he tugs on the reins, but I won't cede control. It's so wide open out here. We turn to the next two logs and I hold him to the base again, making his job harder. He pulls between fences, seeking the pace he needs for jumping.

Then I don't know what fence comes next. I wrestle Driver to a stop and unfold my course map. Sitting in the middle of the field, I stare at the paper, knowing that no one has ever done this on course before.

Driver mouths the bit and jigs. Knowing that everyone sees my lunacy makes the map unreadable. I think about the seconds ticking by and how I should have scratched. There wasn't time to learn this. I am brain injured and defying doctor's orders and I can't see a pattern in the squiggly lines or even figure out which fence comes next. Weariness sucks me down. Tears well as I imagine trotting off the field in defeat. I could just finish with a few logs on the field's edge, but I know the course is supposed to be twisty and I don't want to look stupid. The culvert, the steeplechase brush, and the in-and-out are all on this map. But which one first?

Suddenly the announcer crackles, "Pick a jump, any jump!" and something inside me grabs hold. I decide that the only thing that matters is to keep going, no matter what the course is, no matter what anyone watching thinks. It's just Driver and me. He wants to keep going, and I need to jump jumps.

Suddenly the announcer crackles, "Pick a jump, any jump!" and something inside me grabs hold. I decide that the only thing that matters is to keep going, no matter what.

"Where's she going?" says Kate. "I thought the in-and-out was next."

"It is," says Jenn. "But she's doing something else. God knows what."

I canter Driver toward the steeplechase brush. I hesitate and he tugs the reins through my fingers–I fall up on his neck, but he stays smooth beneath me. I find my balance and sit up tall in time to see the brush come up perfectly. He soars over and gallops on.

Allowing him longer reins, I aim for the big cement culvert pipe. It's not scary because I am centered on his back and we agree. He flies over the culvert with room to spare and gallops on.

I'm tired but balanced with my weight in my heels and his heart in my hands. We jump 12 fences, two more than required, making up a pattern as we go. At this pace, the jumps seem to draw us, pulling me out of months of cerebral mire.

Driver's hoofbeats are music. We spread out. We float.

Epilogue: It's been three years since I fell on my head, and a few symptoms linger. I have trouble filtering sound; I glare at noises behind me and cringe at children's shrieks. And often when I ride trails I know well, synapses fail and mental maps disappear. I have to turn around, letting my horse retrace our steps home.

My hunger to ride is even greater than it was before the accident. Amazingly, I am better at it, too. Physical therapy improved not only my balance, but also my mental focus, and getting a second chance at life has made me braver. I'm alive and I can ride, so I want to go to the jump. The winter after my accident, Driver found work as a hunt horse and I bought a seasoned warmblood jumper named Cavalier. Lesson after lesson, show after show, my new horse has built my confidence, showing me that the positive, forward ride works best.

Terry and I are very happy together. Again he is proving to be my best supporter as I prepare for my latest adventure, moving across the country to accept the position of vice president for college advancement at Franklin & Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. I dedicate this story to him.

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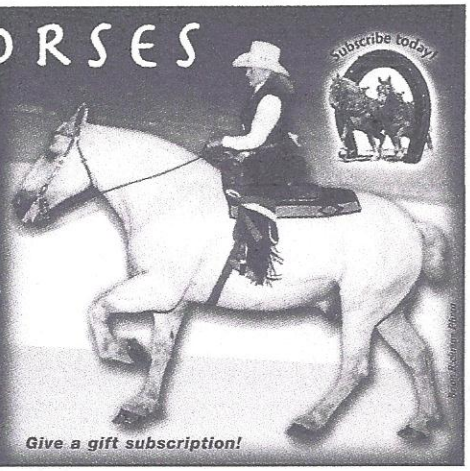

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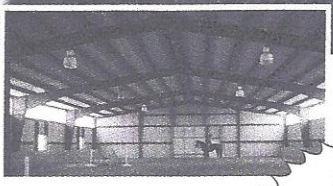

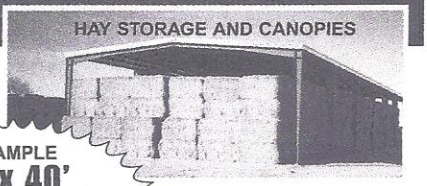

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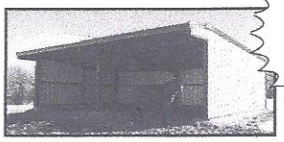

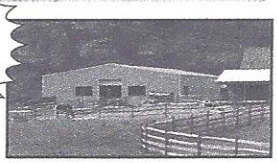

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