

Moon Pony

By Marcella Peyre-Ferry

George would have preferred to spend the summer night outside in the pasture with the other horses and ponies. His job tonight was to stay in his stall so Pinky the Miniature Horse mare would not be all alone in the barn.

Pinky had an abscess in her hoof and had to wear a boot to keep the poultice on and protect it while it healed. Since Pinky was expert at losing the boot, she was spending nights indoors, with one other horse staying in each night to keep her company.

Tonight it was George's turn. If Pinky would be quiet so he could sleep, George would not mind being in, but Pinky walked circles in her stall all night and never seemed to stop. Around midnight, it got worse. The big doors at the end of the center aisle slid open and in came Ray.

George had not seen Ray in a while. The young man cleaned stalls, drove the van to shows, and best of all gave everyone feed and hay morning and night. About a month ago, Ray had stopped coming to the barn and a new person, Josephine took his place doing barn work.

Ray seemed to be in a hurry. He went out toward the pasture then into the tack room. He was dragging the show gear, tack trunks and then saddles out into the aisleway building a pile of tack and gear of all kinds.

"I have their stock trailer hitched to your truck," said a young woman who came into the barn. "Where are all the horses?"

"Change of plans Judy. The horses are all down front by the neighbor's property. No way we can get them without being seen. All we can get are the pony and that rotten mini," Ray said to his sister. "Grab some of this stuff and start filling the truck and trailer."

"You said there were going to be valuable horses so we could make some real money," Judy complained while she bent to the task of moving tack.

"The saddles and all the other junk will bring good money, just like that stock trailer. Besides, this is not really about the money. This is revenge. They had no reason to fire me."

"Going out without feeding the horses, sleeping late instead of feeding breakfast, and then making a pass at one of the teenage girls. With that performance record you should be surprised they didn't fire you sooner," Judy countered.

Ray grumbled something. It didn't matter to George since he didn't understand any of the words. He had a large vocabulary for a pony, thanks to his girl Misty talking to him constantly, but most of his knowledge was related to riding terms, halter commands and words of love.

After the tack room had been emptied Ray used the wheelbarrow to fill half of the trailer with hay bales, and then added the wheelbarrow and all the tools hanging from the wall rack to the load as well. The only things he did not take were halters and lead ropes for Pinky and George.

Ray opened Pinky's door and was knocked flat on his back when the mini mare burst through the opening. He was lucky she didn't step on him on her way out of the stall, down the aisle and out toward the pastures.

Judy reached out a hand to help her brother up, trying her best not to laugh. Ray was not in a mood for humor. "At least we've got the pony," he said.

Judy looked at the brass stall plate. "Gorgeous Galaxy. That's some name," she said. "He really is a pretty pony."

Judy stepped in the stall and put the halter on George. His blue roan coat did in a way look like a starlit night sparkled with tiny spots like a full array of distant stars. She rubbed his head, looking with amazement at the crescent moon shaped marking on his forehead accompanied by two small stars. "I've never seen face markings like this. You are a special pony aren't you."

Those words he understood. He was a special pony and he knew it. The girl was smart enough to see that and she was scratching the spot behind his left ear that felt so good. He didn't put up any fuss when she lead him out of his stall and into the back of the stock trailer.

"This is pretty rotten taking a kid's pony," Judy questioned Ray's judgement in this entire operation.

"The girl that rides him outgrew him a long time ago but won't admit it. I'm actually doing her a favor in a way. They used to come home with championships every show now she's lucky to get a ribbon," Ray tried to justify the horse theft with a very thin excuse.

"Yeah sometimes you do stupid things you shouldn't when you love someone," Judy pestered.

Ray gave her a long hard look. "Like you love me Sis?"

"I must or I wouldn't have let you talk me into becoming a thief," Judy said half to herself while fastening the trailer door closed.

It was unusual to go anywhere in the stock trailer alone. A boarder had abandoned it at the stable in part payment for past board bills. It was used when a group went to a hunt meet or a trail ride.

George wondered where the other horses were, and why had no one put his leg wraps on? Why was all this other stuff packed in beside him, and more important, where was Misty?

"George! George!" Misty shouted as loud as she possibly could. "They must have taken him just like they took all the tack. If he were running around loose like Pinky, he would come when I call or at least come for breakfast. Mom, we've got to find him."

Josephine had called all the horse owners on the emergency contact list when she found the tack room emptied. The relief at finding all the horses still in the pasture, and Pinky safe but on the wrong side of the fence was replaced with a horrible feeling of dread when George could not be found.

"I gave his picture to the police," Misty's mother was an emergency room nurse. She was the ultimate example of being calm amid panic and efficient and organized in the face of disaster. "I'm

leaving messages with the auction houses, all of the horse dealers I can find and everywhere that might notice a pony for sale.”

Staying calm was Mom’s way of keeping Misty calm, but the girl was not willing to sit by quietly. George was her pony and she was going to do everything she could to get him back. Mom was busy bombarding social media with notices looking for information on George. Misty turned to her older brother Hank to drive her to town with a pile of quickly printed posters to hand out.

Misty lead the way, starting with the bulletin board outside the library but then she focused her efforts on the local churches. It was still early Sunday morning, and the churches were places where she could reach the most people. It was also a place where she could ask for prayers.

“I understand handing out flyers at our church, but you’ve hit three we don’t go to and now you want to visit the Catholics?” Hank knew how much Misty cared about George, and he felt sorry for her. At thirteen, Misty should be getting old enough to be able to deal with reality. The pony was probably long gone on his way to a slaughterhouse somewhere. All this work trying to track him down was fine, but it was not likely to do any good.

Misty insisted on going to the Catholic Church next, arriving as the priest was standing on the steps welcoming his parishioners to the second mass of the morning.

“Hello Father,” Misty had her presentation prepared ahead of time. “You probably don’t remember me, but I brought my pony for the Blessing of the Animals. He’s been stolen and I have to get him back. If you could maybe pray for his return and put out some of these flyers it would be a help,” she said handing a stack of wanted posters to the priest.

Father Patterson was polite, but not very interested until he saw the pony’s picture on the flyer. Who could forget the horse with the moon and stars on his face? “His name is George?” the priest read from the flyer. “Our good Saint George was a slayer of dragons. I am sure your George is brave as well. I will include him and you in today’s prayer request and ask everyone to be on the lookout for him.”

Misty left feeling somewhat better. People of all faiths would be watching for George and she had promises of prayers all across town for his safe return. “Just one more stop,” she pleaded with Hank.

The home office of psychic Mystic Madam Mary was closed Sundays, but Mary’s daughter Jenna was a classmate of Misty’s. Jenna was a western rider with a buckskin Quarter Horse she kept at a little barn behind the rodeo grounds just across the state line. Jenna would step up to the challenge and spread the word about the stolen pony to all the western horsemen. George was the kind of pony anyone might want, no matter what kind of saddle they use.

Now as a last resort, Misty asked to talk to Jenna’s mother.

“I’ve been to all the churches, but I want to make sure I cover every possibility,” Misty asked the off-duty psychic.

“I was at fist mass this morning,” the psychic smiled. “Religion and the spiritual world co-exist quite nicely. Let me see your picture of your pony.”

Mary took a deep breath when she saw the flyer. The crescent moon and stars set this little horse apart from the average. "This is very clearly a special pony. I feel sure he will be noticed. Have faith. You will get your pony back."

George was getting bored standing in the stock trailer. He had water and hay, but where was Misty? The trailer was parked in the shade, well off the road far away from traffic. No one was going to see the trailer and certainly no one would see the pony inside it.

Ray thought it would be too risky to drive anywhere in with the trailer in daylight. He would wait for dark. In the meantime, he switched the license plate on the trailer and added decals to the doors and tail gate proclaiming it was the property of R and J Ranch Pony Parties. He put Judy to work hunting serial numbers and initials on the saddles from the theft and either altering the numbers or rubbing them out with a steel wool pad.

Ray managed to line up a buyer for the tack, another for the trailer, and one for the pony.

"You know that place down near the airport where they have rows of shipping containers for stalls? Each one has its own run made of chain link fence like a kennel. That's where we're taking this stuff as soon as it gets dark," Ray told his sister.

"Honestly, they do seem to take good care of the horses down there," Judy tried to be positive. She had joined in this venture in a weak moment when Ray had convinced her there would be good money and no chance of getting caught. As the day went on, the real implications of what they had done and what could happen to them was sinking in. At this point, she was not sure how to get out of this mess. For now, at least, she had to go along with whatever Ray said.

Once it was completely dark, Ray and Judy piled into the truck and started out the lane with the stock trailer and George in tow. The city was only an hour and a half away driving down the interstate, but Ray didn't care about the time. He avoided towns and high traffic areas, sticking to the least used of back roads.

George could see a little through the slatted sides of the stock trailer. It was a rougher ride than the farm's slant load van he was used to. He wondered why the new people were using this noisy, rusty thing instead of the newer trailers from the farm.

He kept expecting Misty would meet him somewhere soon. The longer she was away from him the more he worried that he might be going on to a new owner. Misty was his third little girl, but he loved her best of all. They had all treated him well with peppermint candies, long groomings and the fun of horse shows, but Misty went beyond that.

All people told George what a good pony he is, but Misty did more. She talked all the time while she brushed him, talked all the time she was riding him – except lessons and in the show ring of course – and every day she just stood by the stall door and talked. There were so many words that he didn't understand them all, but he could tell her feelings from the tone of her voice. Sometimes she was happy, sometimes sad – it didn't matter. Though he did not understand the words, he could figure out when to nod his head, when to snort and when to nuzzle up against her to make her feel better.

George had broken Misty in to the point where she was the perfect fit as his rider. At first she was timid in the saddle, but he recognized that and went carefully, ignoring bouncing hands and seat. As she became more confident, he was able to move forward more and challenge her skills. As she began to learn dressage methods he initially demanded her signals be exact. He could have simply done what the instructor said without Misty needing to direct him – he knew all those command words - but then Misty would not have learned. George was proud that he taught his riders well, so when they grew big and went on to horses, they were already expert riders.

Oh no, George suddenly thought. What if Misty was replacing him with a horse? He could be going to a new rider right now.

No that couldn't be right. Misty would not have let him go without saying goodbye. There would be tears and hugs, peppermint candies and talking, talking, talking before she let him go.

George looked out between the slats again. The moon had risen enough that he could see it starting to reach up from the trees as they drove along. Please oh please, George thought. I want to go home to Misty.

Just then there was a loud noise and a big bounce. The noise was terrible scraping and banging. The floor was bounding up and down so much that George neighed in fear begging for help. He had seen about everything a show pony might see from balloons to carnival rides, plus he knew everything a trail pony knows about fallen trees and noisy water crossings. He never spooked, but this was too much.

He thought the people driving must have heard, or maybe they were bouncing too, because the trailer slowed and pulled over off the side of the road. The people came back to the trailer, but they paid no attention to George.

"Two flat tires! Why did it have to be both tires when there's only one spare?" Ray complained

"If you had been going slower you might have seen that branch in the road," Judy grumbled. This business was bad enough to start with and it just kept getting worse and worse. "What are we going to do now?"

Ray had an answer right away. "The plan can still work. Grab the saddles and loose stuff out of the trailer, expensive stuff first. Fill the back seat of the truck. The tack trunks we'll put in the truck bed and cover them with the hay bales so it looks like a load of hay we're taking down the road. We leave the trailer here. It can't be helped. It was only going to sell for a couple hundred bucks so no big loss."

"And what about the pony? Is he going to sit in my lap?" Judy countered.

Ray shook his head. "I guess we leave him here too. Too bad."

Now came all the noise and fuss of the people unloading the trailer. In the dark they banged things around until they finally pointed flashlights all around the trailer. Now they should take him off but they didn't. Instead the girl pulled a last hay bale up beside him where he could reach it. She gave him a pat on the neck and said some words he didn't understand, and then left.

George stomped and shuffled his hooves. There was a noise when the trailer was unhitched, and it dropped a little, but instead of coming back to take him off the people got into the truck and

pulled away. George could see the taillights for just a few minutes until the truck rounded a turn and disappeared.

Now it was quiet – sort of. There were the chirping calls of spring peepers from the marshy ground, the occasional calls of night birds and the rustle of the trees when the wind made them stir.

George grabbed a bite of hay. It was the very best alfalfa that only some of the big horses got to eat. It was rich and wonderful smelling and George reveled in the first bites. Ponies didn't get this quality hay. He should have enjoyed himself and eaten every last flake of hay, but he didn't.

Sometimes there were sounds of cars or trucks going by, their headlights making bright patterns inside the trailer as they hurried by on the isolated road. The passing people would see an abandoned stock trailer, but they would not have seen the dark roan pony inside.

The crescent moon kept rising, catching George's attention. He realized he was alone and he didn't like it.

Like every good pony, George knew how to untie the lead rope that was supposed to be keeping him in place. A good yank with his teeth on the long end below the knot and he was loose. There was room for him to duck under the chest bar at the front. It was positioned for horses, not ponies, so it was easy to get by. There was a latch and handle on the human size side door a push with his nose and the latch clicked open. Another push and the door swung wide.

It was a tight turn, but not hard for the pony. There was just enough room to squeeze through the door and out into freedom. George looked up again, and there was the constant crescent moon. It seemed to be calling to him, telling him something important. Now, somehow, he had to find his way home to Misty. The moon lead him across the road and into the scrub pine woods. There seemed to be a trail of sorts, a trail just pony sized. Into the woods he went until he was stopped by a tangle of branches.

Bang! Louder than the bang when the tires hit the branch, louder than any bang George could remember. He prided himself on his bravery, but this was too much. Forward he went, through the branches, deeper into the wood as fast as he could go, but that was not very far. The trailing lead rope caught in one of the limbs snatching him around by the halter so he was facing back toward the road where he had started.

Now the trailer was joined by a big car that had hit it and pushed in the side, crumpling the spot where he had been riding. There were people talking and fussing, a lady voice seemed to be crying. There was a hissing noise as well coming from the car's hood.

George tried to back away to get farther from all this horrible excitement, but the lead shank was firmly caught and the branch had swung upward so his head was held in the air. If it would go slack a little he could have wrapped his lips around the clip and opened it, but there was no room. If he had enough room to make a good pull on the rope he might have broken the clip, but he was tangled up so short he could not break the metal. He had to stand and watch.

There was smoke coming out of the car and someone yelling "get back". They may have feared it would catch fire, adding to the urgency when they called 911. It was only minutes before a fire department brush truck and a police car, both with spinning lights and sirens appeared.

These were things George had seen before. There was the day that the bad tempered appaloosa horse stopped at a jump sending his rider to the ground where she did not move until the people carried her on a little platform to an ambulance and sped away with siren blaring.

The fire truck had come to the farm when a field fire spread across the pasture. It had bright lights and noise too, and men in strange bulky tack who smelled like smoke. They were frightening until the fire was out. Then they came to the fence to pet the horses and ponies and gave them apples picked from high in the trees where the animals could not reach.

George whinnied to call to the people but there was so much noise no one heard the pony squealing.

It seemed to George that he was stuck there among the trees for the longest time. He was close enough to the people that he could see them but so far that they could not hear his cries. As he tried to spin out of the trap of the lead shank, a choke cherry vine wrapped around his left front fetlock, and another twined around a hind hoof. As he moved it got worse, so that his hind hoof was pulled up by the vine going over his back. Unable to put all four feet on the ground he froze. He knew he was in trouble and his only hope was the people he could faintly see. He turned his head up again and again there was the crescent moon now past its peak in the sky, starting its way downward from the stars, and beside it two brighter lights just like the two stars on his forehead.

George called as he would call to the other horses at the barn when he was taken away for a lesson or when one of them was left to graze in the paddock while he remained in a stall.

He called and called, looking at the crescent moon and wishing for Misty to come to him.

Misty and her mom pulled up to the crash site in their SUV. When the police ran the plates on the abandoned trailer and the numbers came back to a utility trailer instead of a stock trailer, they thought it might be stolen. A check found the manufacturer's ID plate and a VIN number that tracked it to the recent robbery. The state trooper remembered the little girl worried about her missing pony and made sure someone called the family.

As soon as she opened the car door, Misty heard George calling. The other people had been listening to each other and the noises that remained around the crash, but Misty was listening for something else.

She ran across the road and into the woods as the noise made by the pony grew closer and louder. Even though the sound was close by she did not see George in the darkness among the trees. It was then that the crescent moon peaked from behind a cloud that covered it, lighting the way to the tangled pony.

Back in his stall, skin burns from the vines treated with soothing ointment, George enjoyed his hay and the loving brushing Misty was giving him. He was clean enough that he didn't need the grooming, but he appreciated the closeness and attention from Misty.

"I'm glad you found him, but you know, you really are too big for that pony," Hank told his sister.

"No I am not," Misty declared with a firm set to her jaw. "I've been saving up my money to get a cart. George has taught me so much, now I am going to teach him how to drive and we can stay together just like we are."

George didn't quite understand all those words. Drive was something Pinky did. If Pinky could come home from a show with ribbons for something, he knew he could do even better. Gorgeous Galaxy and Misty would soon be back winning championships.