

Lucky's Last Run

It began with a classified ad. A woman needed to rehome two ponies. The only catch was they could not be separated but had to be adopted together.

After a decade of living without land, we had been excited to, once again, have a few acres and regrow our rural roots. We had young grandchildren and a pasture now empty of the neighbor's cattle we had housed for a few years. We also had decades of horse owning in our backgrounds. It felt right. I called the number.

Within a couple of days, the current owner drove up with a trailer and unloaded the two small horses. Lucky was the first, a full-blooded rusty red Shetland pony. A black and white piebald with the sweet name of Sugar was next. She was considered a Pony of the Americas as her parentage included a horse and pony. Due to a recessive gene associated with the piebald coloring, she had been born blind.

In talking with the woman, we learned Lucky had assigned himself to be, not only Sugar's companion, but her eyes. It had worked well. The woman did note that Lucky was in his thirties while Sugar was just in her twenties. And while Shetlands are a long-lived breed, the odds were she would outlive him at some point. A fact we assumed to be in the far future.

Over the next weeks, we learned their personalities and habits. Sugar was generally sweet and gentle but she needed anyone approaching her to speak so she recognized them. Failure to do so would send her into a protective mode where she kicked out in whatever direction she sensed something unknown was coming. Lucky lived up to his Shetland heritage. He had an attitude about the size of a draft horse and had no problem using teeth or hooves to let the world know something was pissing him off.

With Sugar, he was a conscientious guardian. Sugar was happy as long as she could hear or sense him. When he wandered beyond her sensory range, she would become upset, running back and forth, calling for him. He would instantly whicker in answer and make his way back.

They settled into an easy going life. Grain, hay, and treats were plentiful. Our young grandchildren gained their first riding skills on their low-slung backs.

The years rolled by. The grandchildren grew too tall to ride, although they continued to love feeding the ponies treats, grooming them, and taking them for walks through the woods.

The end of one summer, we noticed Lucky withdrawing. He would disappear into the woods and not even respond when Sugar got frantic. We would have to go to the pasture and stand with her until he finally decided to come back.

Earlier, the same year, the neighbors had acquired a quarter horse mare they called Katie. Katie began to hang on the shared pasture fence with Sugar. In time, she assumed Lucky's habit of calling Sugar over when she got panicky and he refused to appear. It became so common that our neighbor offered to sell us Katie as a companion to Sugar as we all suspected Lucky was entering the twilight of his life.

With Katie in our pasture, Sugar transferred her needs to her, allowing Lucky to live his days without demands.

Summer became fall and fall winter. Then one morning in February, my husband, Andy, went to feed. Lucky didn't come despite him calling and rattling the grain buckets. He went searching for him in the cold falling rain and found him down in the far corner of the pasture. It was obvious, our fierce old Shetland's time was at hand.

He returned to the house to let me know. I threw on my jacket and muck boots. We stopped at the barn to grab a horse blanket on our way down to where Lucky lay. After covering him, I volunteered to sit with him while Andy completed the other feedings and got his rain gear.

Huddled up against him, I stroked his neck and told him what a great little horse he had been and how much we loved him. I promised we would take care of Sugar for him.

As I stroked, I heard the sound of hooves squelching through the mud. Katie appeared with Sugar in tow. Katie bent her head and gently put her nose against Lucky's, exchanging breath. Then she moved back a little and nudged Sugar. Sugar, too, stepped forward and touched noses for some moments. After Sugar raised her head, Katie led her away.

When they had disappeared back up the slope, I told Lucky he would soon see a pasture. The most beautiful pasture ever. And when he saw it, he was to go for it with our blessings and thanks for sharing part of his life with us.

Andy arrived dressed in his rain gear to take over sitting with Lucky. I headed back to the house, thoroughly soaked, chilled, and heartbroken. I changed into dry jeans and a sweatshirt, then poured myself another cup of coffee. I sat at the dining room table so I could look down into the pasture, although the slant of the land didn't afford any view of what was transpiring in the far corner.

Nearly an hour passed before I saw my husband coming over the rise. I could tell by his slow steps and the slump of his shoulders Lucky had left us.

He stopped on the back deck and slipped off his rain gear and boots before coming in the house. "He's gone," was all he said.

I nodded. "I guessed when I saw you coming."

He poured himself more coffee, then stood at the sink, staring out the kitchen window toward the pasture as he sipped. "You know, it was the strangest thing. Not long after you left, he laid over on his side. I think he was unconscious at that point and his breathing was slowing. Then just as he was taking his last breath, all four of his legs began to move just like he was running someplace."

"Home. He was going home."