

Flying Aster

by Rosanna P. Brost

A failed thoroughbred racehorse becomes a champion cross country event horse through love and kindness from a gentle hand.

Everything about running terrified Aster; she hated the claustrophobia of being crammed inside of the rusted blue gates with no room to turn around, loathing the terrifying ringing explosive clatter as they sprung open. At this the horrible beast sitting limpet on her back would smack her and kick her and already frightened by all the commotion surrounding her body Aster would run, run as fast as she could... which was never ever even nearly fast enough. Other horses always leapt out faster, charged forwards swifter in a roar of steel clad hooves chopping earth, leaving Aster flagging in the back, clods of mud and dirt flying up from the other horses' feet to pelt her in the face, all while the beast on her back cursed in frustration at her. The metal bar in her mouth would jiggle unpleasantly in her mouth, banging against her teeth, poking her tongue and hard palette. Ahead the other horses would draw away, all of them seeming so much happier and less afraid than Aster; in them there seemed to be a drive to lead that Aster had been born without.

Eventually Aster would be allowed to stop running but only after her flanks were dripping sweat, her heart was pounding away without her and she was absolutely filthy.

Aster could not comprehend what the point of all the running was, and why they always ran in a long circle, in the same direction. She did not understand why the brightly coloured limpet beasts were so mean when normal humans on the ground were generally very tolerable, even friendly, washing away the sweat and mud then giving her tasty grain to eat, covering her body in a nice dry blanket. In her clean box stall with its cosy floor of fluffy shavings Aster felt safe, reminded of her mother, of playing in the pasture and jumping over wildflowers. These memories were so distant now; all Aster now knew were stalls, track, and hotwalker.

A clear cold morning came, Aster's groom rousing her with kind murmurings and the affection that she was weak for, confused because she had not been woken at the usual torturously early hour. In hope of a good brushing Aster stepped warily from her stall, flicking her ears as she smelled a strange human, a woman, who watched her back with as smile as big as Aster's groom's. Aster was not sure about the stranger's smile; it was peculiar to see a strange human smile at the same time as her groom - her jockeys almost never smiled around her. And then, to Aster's confusion her groom offered the woman Aster's spare curry comb, and together the two humans brushed her, Aster snuffing in bewilderment because both humans seemed so happy. Was her groom relieved? He definitely seemed relieved!

The morning lagged in this lovely fashion without Aster being firmly steered out onto the track, without her groom ever reaching for her bridle or saddle and all the two humans did was brush and pet Aster, talking to her in soothing voices. At long last her groom lay her blanket over her back, smoothing it out with care then wrapping her legs in her shipping boots, which Aster knew meant that she was bound for another racetrack. Upon this realization Aster swept back her ears, but at a scotch mint in her groom's palm and a gentle word Aster lay them back forwards in resignation. Aster did not get treats very often; her grumpy owner got very cross if he caught any of his staff feeding his racehorses anything fun.

The strange woman took Aster's lead rope and led her around the corner to a trailer - a *strange* trailer that was far smaller than the one that Aster was used to. Aster whuffed uncertainly, wondered why her grinning groom's eyes were streaming tears as he hugged her around her neck, then helped the strange woman secure Aster inside the trailer with a netful of sweet alfalfa hay. Aster, used to grain, lipped at it curiously, then forgot everything else but the delicious hay until she ate it all and Aster watched the world outside the trailer window constantly change, each town smelling a little bit different. Eventually, in the dark the journey finally ended, in an alien hilly place that smelled extremely interesting, and the strange woman let her out of the trailer, then led her into...

...a pasture.

Aster halted stiff, trembling in shocked delight and the moment that the woman slipped off Aster's halter, freeing her to the wind, Aster remembered how running had once been fun. There was lush grass under her hooves and Aster became a baby again, romping around at her own beck. She bucked and

kicked, charged and jumped, rolled and squealed until she was too happily tired to do anything but lay, munching enthusiastically upon the living grass which was even better than the hay had been.

There was a soft thud of hooves, and an old, kind red bay gelding trotted over to sniff her, and for many seasons he, Hugo, was her best friend. Aster forgot about running in endless scary circles; her days were as they had been when she had been very little, playing and grazing in the big green pasture. Hugo the gelding was always by her side, except when he carried the nice woman, Maria, who Aster slowly grew fond of because whenever Maria rode Hugo, she let Aster tag along, trotting behind them, sometimes with only a halter on her face. They explored outside the pasture, sometimes trailering to places closer to the tall blue mountains which Aster and Hugo could see from their field. Almost every day Maria would come to brush them both, often sitting with them afterwards while they grazed, black and red bay coats shining healthy in the sun.

Maria always had scotch mints in her pockets for Aster.

For years and years, Aster forgot about wearing anything more complicated than her faded purple nylon halter. Aster's black fur silvered to overcast grey and dappled prettily as she grew into a tall, sturdy mare. Aster became stronger and much faster than she had ever been as a filly but just as rambunctious, still spending long happy moments playing around a doleful Hugo. Once in a while the gelding would canter along with her and buck like he was not double her age but he preferred to spend his days grazing or snooze in the sunshine with Aster keeping watch. Whenever Maria gave him a bath Hugo made a point of slyly rolling in the dirt the moment that she set him loose, a game which he tried to teach to Aster to no avail because Aster still detested filth and remained fastidious.

After a long time, Maria took to lunging Aster, then introduced her to a saddle again, but the padded saddle was much more comfortable than those Aster remembered wearing as a filly. Soon, Maria showed Aster a new game that was even better than running in dirty circles which involved leaping over fences while racing across vast fields. When Maria started transporting Aster to new courses where there were crowds of strange humans and other horses who thrived on the same jumping game Aster did not balk. There, her bravery was rewarded by the challenge of new obstacles to leap over, Aster thrilling as she nimbly bounded over hedges then splashed through deep muddy pools to jump out again then charge down straightaways, trusting happily in Maria's lightly guiding hands, no bit in Aster's mouth. Trailriding for ages with old Hugo had made Aster resilient and clever, her footwork smart - only very rarely did Aster ever slip.

On one of these racing days, Aster sprinted across the chalked finish line in an open paddock and all the watching humans erupted into cheering. A memory struck Aster then, a memory of long ago, on a muddy track, shambling along in last place, watching the humans cheer the horse far ahead of her and it occurred to Aster: *she had just won a race.*

From somewhere within her fresh energy burst, her hooves picking high as a laughing Maria praised her, setting Aster's long grey tail to flagging. Like her distant desert ancestors Aster pranced, feeling massively proud, and best of all, no longer ever afraid of running.
