



MANY

A Story of Addiction, Dysfunction, Codependency...

BRAVE

...and Horses

FOOLS

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CHAPTER SEVEN

PRESENT

I was fully feeling every emotion I had about Maverick: sadness, frustration, shock, anger. I wanted to buy him, but I didn't have the money to do so. And I shouldn't buy him because, in truth, he was not the correct horse for me. But what if I had a trainer who would work with me, who would teach me how to use all the natural horsemanship magic I read about in books, who could help get Maverick to be happy with me? What if I committed myself to making it work?

Wait—I'd been down this road before.

I almost wished I didn't know...but I couldn't pretend it wasn't happening.

I made up stories about how it all would turn out well at the end of the day—how somebody (whobody?) bought Maverick for me, and we moved him to a barn with a terrific trainer, and working together, we brought out Maverick's best, and he was happy and I was happy...and I couldn't sustain those stories, because they were not ever going to be true. The truth was, he was going to be sold, and he was going to go away, and it hurt like hell.

I couldn't do it any other way. I couldn't defer the pain. I wasn't able to live without *feeling* anymore. I'd reached the point of no return, and I didn't know what to do, except to feel all

that shit. They were selling Maverick, and I didn't know how to bear it.

I bore it by feeling it, in the now.



Pain makes you focus. But what do you focus on? The pain itself? Or something else?

I couldn't talk about the end of my marriage outside a small circle of friends. I was so afraid that it would be my fault if my husband's life became shit that fear tingled up and around and through my body in great rushes. I wore my wedding ring because I was not capable of explaining why I didn't have it on. I couldn't look at the pain, I could only walk beside it, and peek at it out of the corner of my eye.

Paradoxically, however, the pain was so *there*, and I was so aware of its magnitude, that it forced me to focus on other things. This wasn't like denial, at which I was adept, where I ignored reality in order to forget about the pain. I understood that my reality was all about pain, I accepted it, and in accepting it, I figured out ways to relieve the pain as I went along. I focused on breathing, I focused on walking. I went in to work every day, and it was the best gig I ever had, because I was able to be a person designing a magazine, and I didn't have to be anything else. I listened to the same Louise Hay CD every single day for the remainder of the summer. I went to Al-Anon meetings because I knew I could talk there and no one would try to fix me. All of my energy was invested in putting one foot in front of the other and in becoming...well, not "myself" again. I had started moving toward something else.

And a large part of that movement had to do with summoning the courage to try riding a horse.

I will never, ever forget walking down that long, long road from the barn after that first lesson, after I didn't fall off, after I eventually realized that I had the power to take a tiny action that made me feel safe up there, on Mercury. I had never, ever, in all my life, felt prouder of myself than I did in that moment. I felt like every cell in my body had been shaken up in some way, energized to a degree I had never experienced before. I didn't feel like "a woman who had a failed marriage"—I felt like I was *alive*. I felt like there was hope. I felt like I could learn something new. I felt like I was more (finally) than my obsessive mind. I felt like all the pain I had endured emotionally was shifting, and though it had not been completely purged, it had at least been put to the side, somewhere neutral, for a couple of hours.

As my devotion to horses increased, the quizzical looks began. They ran the gamut from genuine curiosity, as in "that's an interesting choice of sport for an adult who has never done it before," to the slightly condescending "don't-you-have-anything-better-to-do" arched brows of those who thought "discovering" horses in midlife meant running away from something, not running toward it. I was learning new skills, I said, or I told them I was getting fit. Most people didn't want to hear that every single time I got on a horse, I had the opportunity to heal in some way. It was too "woo-woo." No one wanted to be expected to believe that an animal ("dumb," implied) was the way forward through all the shit I had managed to create for myself. Few understood that in the act of sharing breath with a horse, I was inviting an uncompromising assessment of my own being. That nothing, not one single thing that happened around and on a horse had much to do with anything outside of myself, what I was bringing to the moment, my emotional temperature, my state of physical being.

Cathal had taken to following me out of the arena at the end of a lesson without my leading him by the reins. He would

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stop when I stopped, and walked on when I did so. Jaws dropped and eyes lit up, and it was so gratifying for me that he had, in natural horsemanship terms, “joined up” with me, that he considered me his leader, worthy of following. And yet, as we made our way to the barn, if I started to worry he might jog off down the road, or kick out at a pony, sure enough, his pace would pick up, and I’d grab his reins before he could fulfill the rest of my nightmare scenario. Was he reading my mind? Yes, as it expressed itself through my body language, from the change in my breathing to the tensing of my muscles.

There were practical, down-to-earth lessons I learned every single hour I spent at the barn that allowed me to work with horses in a practical, down-to-earth fashion, but even getting a horse to allow me to pick up his hoof so I could remove debris prior to a ride could descend into a battle of wills in which I had the potential to come out the loser. In order for that seemingly simple task to be completed, I had to project the correct degree of assertiveness and patience, and I had to be believable in my actions. I had to squeeze the backside of the horse’s lower leg in a particular place known to encourage him to raise his foot. If I just waved my hand around in the vicinity of his leg, I’d be ignored. If I squeezed, and released, and squeezed, and waited, and I didn’t give up, then (eventually) we both succeeded: I communicated clearly, I did what I intended to do, and the horse got a nice clean foot.

Sometimes when I would talk to someone about a horse—like the first time I rode Delilah, and how I annoyed her because I was pissed off at her for not listening to me, and how I realized I was projecting all sorts of expectations on her without clearly asking for what I wanted, and how, when I apologized to her, she put her head right over the door and leaned her chin on my shoulder. When I told a story like that, if I didn’t get the curiosity or the condescension, I might get a frightened look: *She is out of her mind.*

Thank you, yes, I am out of my mind, finally, and into my body. I am feeling things through the palms of my hands, the soles of my feet, and indeed my ass, that are lifting me out of a lifetime of mental obsessing, and into a state of being that is wholly present. My attention is focused purely on the task at hand and nothing else interferes; when it does, I don't dwell on it, I correct it and return my focus to where it belongs, on the horse and what we're doing. And as I became more and more accustomed to this feeling, of being grounded in my muscles, my bones, my cells, and not "out there," somewhere in the ether of my fantasies, I started feeling more effective in my work, my relationships (of all kinds), in all aspects of my life.

I knew that endorphins—the ones I'd studied so I could explain my feelings—were the result of the physical activity related to horseback riding, and that they were producing a feeling of well-being that I had never known, or had never known to be consistent—not in a way that I could actually invoke, that was at my disposal, that wasn't a fluke or the luck of the draw. This was now a feeling I could facilitate, that I could tend to, in the sense that I could be one hundred percent *there* for it.

Could this be what all those gurus mean about "being in the present moment"?

Quite a few times I'd heard Louise Hay say the following:

When you do not flow freely with life in the present moment, it usually means you are holding onto a past moment. It can be regret, sadness, hurt, fear or guilt blame, anger, resentment, and sometimes a desire for revenge. Each one of these states comes from a space of unforgiveness, a refusal to let go, and to come in to the present moment. Only in the present moment can you create your future.

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I certainly regretted having my crop stolen. I made the mistake once of leaving it lying around the barn one afternoon, and within seconds (or so it seemed), it was gone. Pilfered. Robbed. Riding Maverick without a whip was strategically impossible, so I had to keep borrowing until I had one of my own again.

There was usually a bunch of abandoned whips lying around the place (somehow mine was never among them), but one Saturday, it didn't seem like there were any to hand. Mav and I were settling in to begin the warm-up, when I saw it.

A crop. Lying on the track in the arena, nearly buried in the sand, easy enough to miss. A mauvey-purple affair, clearly well used, but entire, from handle to the little leather bit at the end (which probably has a proper name, but I like to refer to it as "the slappy part"). It wasn't like someone had discarded it because it was broken—it was perfectly useable. In the back of my mind, I imagined grabbing it up at the end of the lesson.

Then I forgot about it.

Or so I thought.

We jumped a cross-rail, and after a few times over, Niamh added a second fence close enough to make a "bounce," so-called because the horse couldn't take a stride between obstacles. We headed in at a trot, which Maverick didn't care for, nor was he impressed by the lowness of the fences. He jumped lackadaisically, and as we went back to wait another turn, I thought about scolding him for his laziness. Then a lessonmate, who was riding Ruby, began her approach. In the process, Ruby kicked the mauvey-purple whip where it still lay on the ground, and I thought, No, don't break it!

That's when I realized that Maverick's attitude had everything to do with my inattention. I wasn't paying attention to our lesson or the bounce, so why should he?

By then, it was too late. Mav had clearly written me off for the evening. Niamh added a third fence, two strides after the bounce; we were so consistently awful at this combination that it was astounding. I realized that I couldn't just get into the zone after being zoned out, because the horse had a say as to whether that mattered.

We landed after our last go, and I was so off-balance, I almost fell off, and in trying not to fall off, I yanked on Maverick's mouth, causing him unnecessary annoyance and pain. I wasn't good enough yet to pull myself together, and frankly, I was so stunned to discover that I'd been obsessing about that whip that all my focus went toward obsessing about obsessing.

Obsessing is about fear, doubt, distorted thinking, and a basic skepticism that anything will ever work out. Whatever the topic is, the mind takes the ball and runs with it, and runs, and runs—and runs. This is not the least bit like riding a twenty-meter circle over and over and over, because when you are obsessing, you are not adjusting or correcting, or making small changes that clarify the whole. You are only ensuring that your incorrect thinking is building and building, in magnitude and force, until the entire situation is mentally out of control. You may be sitting in a chair, completely physically inactive, looking rather still and serene, but in your head, cities are burning and tumbling into the sea. You may be cooking dinner, looking competent and content, and all the while you are engaging in a spot of disaster-thinking that grows and grows until you're imagining yourself dead on the side of the road. Linda Kohanov, author of *The Tao of Equus*, would say your inside is not reflecting your outside, and you are entirely incongruent. You are completely out of whack. Your mind is going one way and your body the other.

One defining characteristic of all the self-help books I collected over time was that they all recommended *living in the present*

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moment. That was where the healing and the good-life-stuff happened. But everything in my existence had been predicated upon denying that there *was* a present moment. I totally got why it was a good suggestion, not the least of which was the promise of a freedom from anxiety I wanted to experience so strongly that it made me anxious. (Why can't I live in the moment? What's wrong with me? Am I in it now? Now? *Now?*) Every move I made and every thought I had was all about minimizing past damage and preventing future destruction. I wanted The Now as much as I wanted to be a rider, because I felt like there was magic there, in The Now, and if I had that, then I could fix everything else.

I needed to get out of my mind without losing it. I had to stop being so self-conscious that I was taking myself out of the present. If I was so focused on myself and what was wrong with me and what was going to happen because of the way things had always happened in the past, I would never, ever move forward. This was my addiction. This was my drug. This was the way I dealt with the fear of the unknown, and this was how I checked out of life. I didn't need to take a pill or drink a fifth of vodka—all I had to do was let my mind go off to the races. As I began to ride, to spend time in a stable next to a horse, I began to slowly descend from the ether and get into my physical self.

It used to be so hard for me to get up in the saddle—not because of fear, but because my body didn't understand how to “get up there.” I had to see myself *up there*, as I bounced and bounced on my right leg, my left foot propped in the stirrup, my left hand gripping the mane, my right hand almost entirely (Almost? Entirely!) gripping the offside bottom of the saddle as I finally summoned the nerve and hauled myself up and on.

The act of mounting was the first thing that I had to learn to do with my body and not my mind; the second thing was to sit back, when every instinct said to curl up in a ball. The third

thing I learned was actually almost as tricky as learning to sit back, and that was to look where I was going. It would appear that looking where I was going would be a natural extension of paying attention, of staying in the present moment, but it was amazingly easy not to do. In a lesson on a school horse, going round and round, you could easily let the horse trot on automatic pilot and not participate in his forward movement. But when you were looking where you were going and paying attention, you were riding from your seat and influencing the way the horse was moving. Roisin would always exhort us to ride our own twenty-meter circles: look ahead to the next quarter of the circle, actively ask for the horse to flex and bend, do not merely trot along placidly, following the horse in front of you.

It was still easy enough to get caught in the habit of staring at the back of my horse's head, easy enough to get caught up in the rhythm—of the trot, especially—and just go with it. Pulitzer Prize-winning author Jane Smiley, a horsewoman, writes in her memoir *A Year at the Races* about how her position on the horse influenced not only her work in the arena, but also her presence in the world:

I practiced keeping my heels down and my eyes up. The effect of this was to orient my body properly on the horse, and, indeed, properly on the planet, so that, as in walking upright, gravity would promote stability rather than undermine it...To look down is to enter into a trance of self-consciousness, and potentially, to fall. A rider looking down is already beginning to part from her horse, because her seat and thighs are already beginning to lift and tilt forward. Her horse is already beginning to react to her shift in weight by shifting his own weight. He is getting ready to stumble.⁵

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I'm fairly certain I've spent most of my life walking with my gaze glued to the pavement. When I lived in New York City, I was pathologically obsessed with picking up pennies, mainly because I always saw the stupid things. And I always saw them because I was always, always looking down. I was walking up Seventh Avenue once, saw a penny, picked it up, and some dude passing on my right smiled at me and said, "Good luck!"

I replied, "I think I should be looking up at the sky, or something, you know?"

He laughed, and we went our separate ways.

In Ireland, that's where I began to see everything: On the north side of Dublin, walking past Connolly Station, I saw the people swarming out of the station itself, I saw the crowd surging against the light to cross to Talbot Street, I saw the taxis pulling out of the rank, I saw the buses trundling back up the coast road, and in the distance, I saw one of the trams from the Luas line, the light rail system that runs in city center, curving away toward Abbey Street. I saw it all, because my head was up, my eyes were forward, and my chin was down.

One of my lessonmates once said that she'd started to drive a car like she was riding, meaning she was very, very aware of both sides of her body at the same time. I'd started to correct my walk the way I would correct myself in the saddle. I would catch myself leaning forward, and I'd consciously sink back into my hips, tuck the back of my neck into my collar, drop my chin. I would swiftly catch myself spacing out, gazing into the gutter, and pick up my head.

A forward gaze is confident, assured, and the rest of the body follows, up and out and forward. Is it mind over matter, or matter over mind? I think it's actually about healing this dualistic split, about making the self whole. It's not either/or, it's both/and. Sometimes I need to think with my head, but I also need to

allow my body to speak its own mind—and, sometimes, to make decisions for me.

Early in my riding career, I started my week off with a lesson on Monday morning. There was nothing better than starting the week with a lesson under my belt—and nothing worse than having to get out of bed at 5:50 a.m. to get to the barn in time.

Anytime the alarm went off at stupid o'clock and I had to get up, even if it was for something that I loved to do, my first impulse was to stay curled up under the covers. If it seemed like it might be raining the first time the buzzer buzzed, that was reason enough to blow the lesson off. Somewhere between the second and third time I hit snooze (I hate mornings) I would somehow find myself on my feet, and by the time I remembered to kill the fourth alarm, I'd have gotten myself into my gear and out the door. I'd be on my bus, wondering how I'd gotten there.

My body got me out the door. As “heady” as I have always been my whole entire life, my body seemed to have finally found its voice, and its authority: One minute I'd be dreaming away the morning, and the next I'd be fully clothed, standing at the bus stop.

If my body could speak, I expect its Monday-morning pep talk would have sounded something like this:

Nope, let's go! Come on! It's not raining, it might not rain, even if it does rain by the time you get on the long road, there are plenty of trees, you won't get too wet, you won't get soaked, come on: Jodhs on! Top—on! Bag packed, zip up the half chaps, don't mind the coffee, you'll survive, put on the fleece, the next jacket, the big jacket, sling the bag on your shoulder, keys, open the door, lock the door, go, go, go!