

Holding On

by Dominique De Vito

My mother's mare was named Flower Petal.

When I think of a flower petal, I think of something pretty, and soft, and delicate. Something still, and precious almost. Fragile. Something you would want to protect from breaking, like the turquoise shell of a just-hatched robin's egg.

Flower Petal was a gorgeous horse, but soft and delicate she was not. She was a 4-year-old thoroughbred fresh off the track whose speed had been impressive but who wouldn't break from the starting gate. No shrinking violet, she! Flower Petal was a pistol. She was a sleek bay horse with a jet black mane and tail, and one small white sock on her left hind leg. She had a star of white hairs in the middle of her picture-perfect dark brown head.

At the peak of the season for foxhunting – late winter and spring – when she was in the best shape, she was all muscle. Her dark brown eyes blazed, and when she heard the hounds, her ears pricked to attention and she danced in anticipation of galloping after them.

In the hunt field, she chomped on the bit in her mouth – an especially strong one designed to provide the rider with a better set of brakes, as part of the bit was a metal chain that looped behind the horse's lower lip and was controlled with an extra set of reins. A lot of the hunt horses needed these bits, since keeping up with the hounds demanded a dance of flat-out speed with the talent to stop on a dime and change course. A horse that could handle the physical challenges of the hunt sometimes three times a week, year after year, was an impressive animal. Such a horse was not a flower petal – except for my mother's mare.

It was understood in my early days of riding – especially foxhunting – that Flower Petal was way more horse than I could handle. For years I admired her from my perch in the saddle on various ponies. In truth, they looked up to her as much as I did, and in some ways my mother didn't have to worry about me too much out hunting, because whatever pony I was on did all it could to keep up with Flower Petal as she took off in front of us.

Riding in a foxhunt was humbling and intoxicating. On the best of days, you could gallop for hours while the hounds chased the scent of a running fox, stopping just long enough to make sure you weren't being left hopelessly behind. We galloped over rocks, up and down hills, through streams and woods, across wide open fields, and we jumped fences big and small. Falling off was common. If it didn't scare you away, foxhunting made you a bit of a thrill seeker, every heart-pounding charge fueling the desire to do it again.

It was that cocky self-confidence that gave me the courage to ride Flower Petal one day instead of my trusted pony. I could handle her, I thought, I was sure of it. We weren't going hunting, just out riding on a circuit I did all the time. It was a late fall afternoon, so I knew I didn't have much time, either, before it would get dark. A short, easy ride. No problem.

I tacked her up and got on. Sitting comfortably in the saddle, strong bit in her mouth, we set out through the woods away from our barn on a routine ride. Flower Petal felt nothing like my solid little pony who I

knew so well. She danced as she walked, spirited and prickly, sensing my excitement and knowing I wasn't her usual passenger.

As soon as we were out of the woods, I gathered the reins, sat back slightly in the saddle, and gave her a squeeze to ask for a trot. She shot out from under me, and I sank in my hips and pushed down my heels to get a better feel for her rhythm. In a moment we were in synch, and I was posting to the smoothest trot I'd ever experienced. It felt like floating – elastic and effortless.

I pulled her up to a walk at the bottom of the hill and relaxed my grip on the reins and the pressure in my seat. She knew what to do: We always walked on paved roads. She knew where to turn off the road onto the next trail, too, which led into a big open field. I felt an anticipation in her. I gathered the reins again and nudged her into an elegant, if edgy, trot. Her ears were going front and back, picking up clues about what I wanted her to do, almost asking.

I leaned forward to give her more of her head and increase her speed. She, in turn, leaned in to my hands through the reins and started a loping canter. I stood up slightly in the stirrups, feeling like a jockey warming up my horse before a big race. My eyes were focused straight ahead, my breathing became deeper, my heart was pounding, calves squeezing against the saddle, pressed to her side. I wanted to laugh.

I wanted to sing.

Flower Petal was everything I'd sensed her to be from the ground and from my pony's back: a thoroughbred muscle of a horse ready to explode. As if on cue, she did. Her head went down slightly, and I felt her take the bit in her teeth. I couldn't see them, but I felt her nostrils flare - a deep breath to fuel the engine of her heart, her hoofs.

As I moved to gather the reins, she gave a nod, they slipped from my fingers, and we were off. Flower Petal was flying up the hill. The ground was rushing out from under me, and I saw the top of the hill coming up way too fast. I was being run away with.

I was holding on with my legs, struggling to maintain balance and not panic. My fingers fumbled with the reins. I was breathing hard. With all the strength I could muster through my fear, I grabbed and shortened my hold on the reins, securing them in my fists, clenching the left one shorter than the right, and clamping my hands on her neck, grabbing her mane for extra security.

Blessedly, the shortened left rein caused her to move in that direction, away from the top of the hill, and we began the arc of a circle I hoped would save me. Flower Petal was still churning under me, asking to run and run and run. I was still a fly on her side that she was eager to flick off, but I held on. We circled down the hill and then back up. We circled again. She slowed. We were moving back up the hill, and she wasn't finished yet. She bucked, arching her back and kicking out her hind legs. I gulped air and fought back tears, my heart and muscle clenched to stay with hers. We circled again.

Finally, she dropped to a trot, working to regain control of the bit in her mouth. If she could've bitten through it, she would have, and she would have taken off and left me far behind.

Through my fear, I loved her for it.

I got what she was doing.

I marveled at her spirit.

But I wasn't going to lose.

I kept my fists balled on her neck with the reins firm until I felt the surge in her sputter and dissipate. She was chomping at the bit, but she was walking. Trembling, but still in the saddle, I steered her back the way we came. I didn't dare move out of a walk all the way home.

I would ride Flower Petal many more times, and every one of them was as exciting as riding a roller coaster. She was never soft and delicate, and that was the real beauty of her. She could jump the moon. She had the heart of a lion. She was electric. She made you feel like anything was possible....if you could hold on.