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## Rein 'Em In

A word of advice to parents of young daughters: do not, under any circumstances, take your daughter to a stable and let her feed carrots to the horses. This seemingly innocent activity will lead to the depletion of your resources – time, money and emotional energy. A trip to a local barn with your six-year-old daughter can only result in her begging for riding lessons. You sign her up, because twenty dollars for a one-hour lesson once a week seems affordable. You purchase black rubber boots and a velvet riding helmet, rationalizing to yourself that any sport – be it soccer, hockey, or baseball – requires equipment.

The riding instructors are trained to encourage mothers to spend money. Once they see your daughter smiling as she jumps a pony over a pole lying on the ground, they express what you have always known: your daughter has talent. “Have you considered a half-lease?” they inquire. So, you pay a few extra dollars a month, drive to the barn three times a week instead of once, and you get to put your fingers in the pony’s mouth to adjust the bit. You justify your decision with the knowledge that the barn is warmer than an ice rink or a soccer field.

You spend hours sitting on hard bleacher benches watching your daughter urge the pony over jumps that now sit a few inches off the ground. You watch her fall off. You hold your breath; you lose years off your life. Christopher Reeve fell off and was

paralyzed, you remember. The trainer tells you not to worry. “The jumps aren’t stationary like eventing jumps. It’s good exercise.”

Reassured, you move to the next level and agree to a full-lease. Your expenditures increase monthly; you drive to the barn five days a week, and buy a saddle.

The trainer tells you your daughter is a natural rider, so when he suggests you buy your own pony, you succumb. “Think of it this way,” the trainer says, “It’ll keep her out of trouble.” You write the cheque for the new pony. You write a cheque for board and feed. You write a cheque for the vet who de-worms and inoculates the pony. You write a cheque for the farrier who trims the hooves every six weeks. You write a cheque for horse insurance. You write a cheque for the tack store. The tack store employees address you by your first name as they load the bridle, saddle pads, winter and summer blankets into the truck. (Yes, you buy a truck.) Add new leather boots for your daughter’s growing feet, a set of spurs, a pair of gloves, a bag of horse treats, and hairnets.

Yes, you can give lists to relatives and friends for Christmas and birthday presents, but the curry combs, hoof picks, and dandy brushes hardly offset the costs of the show season. Shows. Each requires entrance fees, trucking, board, hay, someone to braid the pony’s tail and mane, beige jodhpurs, a crisp white shirt, and a navy jacket. You open a tab at the concession stand. You never do that again. You order an eight-by-ten glossy of your child and her pony in mid-flight. You buy the video. And, you spend the last hours of the show undoing the tiny coarse braids. Your fingers freeze into an arthritic pose. You wrap the pony’s legs for traveling. Exhausted and longing for a hot bath and a glass of wine, you glance at your daughter sitting beside you in the truck, half asleep, clutching a fistful of ribbons. There are no ribbons for you.

The costs of the show continue. You drop her clothes at the drycleaners. She polishes her boots and tack on the carpet in front of the television, forgetting to put down newspaper. You call the carpet cleaners.

You save for the day your daughter outgrows the pony and requires a horse. The trainer tells you that the more you spend on a horse, the more successful your daughter will be. “What,” you ask the trainer, “is the difference between a thousand dollar horse and a million dollar horse?” He tells you it’s just the number of zeros. The pony sells. You then write the trainer a cheque with another zero. You buy larger horse blankets.

As your daughter trains with her new horse for the next show season, you spend money on yourself. You buy your own grooming kit and stock it with a silver flask filled with Grand Marnier. You add a flashlight and extra batteries, band-aids, Tylenol, scissors, needle and thread, safety pins, and suntan lotion. You reserve hotels for the out-of-town shows, even if they are only an hour away. Driving home late and turning around to be back at five a.m. could cost you your lives.

Back at home, you watch from your kitchen window as your child jumps, without her horse, a course she has devised from patio furniture, brooms and shovels. Sure, riding is good for a teenage girl – it keeps her off the streets and out of the malls. You are relieved that she shows little interest in boys and just kisses her horse. The trainer, of course, tells you that riding is a team sport. “They’re a team with their horses,” he says, “And they compete as a group with the other barn kids.” But, as a mother, you worry about her lack of socializing with school friends. She turns down invitations because she has to go to the barn.

While it is true that your daughter demonstrates responsibility, determination, and competitiveness, you feel emotionally exhausted after spending hours listening to her cry with frustration at falling off, bruising her ego, not meeting her goals, and losing the championship. You feel anxious as your credit cards reach their limit. You become a stranger to family members.

When your daughter quits riding at the age of seventeen, you are relieved. This feeling is short-lived. She trades the thoroughbred in for a Mustang convertible with considerably more horsepower.

You pack up her saddle, boots, and riding jacket, and place them in the blue tack box. You do not count the rosettes as you lay them in a Rubbermaid container. If you did, you might calculate how much each one of those ribbons cost you. You never do take your younger daughter to the stable with carrots. You take her to the pet store to look at the fish.