

Chapter 14

INCRIMINATING HOOFPRIENTS

Excerpted from

Honey, Do You Need a Ride? Confessions of a Fat Runner

By Jennifer Graham

I am riding a bike, rather ungracefully, with a man who is not my husband, and my husband—okay, dammit, *ex-husband*—is off, God-knows-where, with a woman who is not his wife.

Not yet, anyway.

My repeated attempts to reconcile have been as effective as my thirty-year diet, which is to say, I'm still divorced and I'm still fat, even though I run a gazillion or so miles every week. And now, of course, my former husband has gone and found himself a younger, thinner woman, and when a man does that, really, what can you do?

Not that any of this matters right now.

Right now, all that matters is that I get home before the school bus does, and so Sam and I are pumping it, pedaling our bikes as fast as my aching calves will allow.

Normally, I'd already be out on the porch, drinking coffee while I wait for the kids. But Sam has come over to help me fix a few things around the house, and after that, the New England autumn seduces us. The trees that were so stately and dignified in the spring have morphed overnight into hussies. Soon they will shamelessly shed their leaves, but for a few more days they remain maples without morals, flaming exhibitionists putting on a show.

On a day like this, Sam and I agree, you have to be outside or your

soul starts to ache, and frankly, I don't need any other parts of me hurting. So we ride our bikes to the local turkey farm, where we eat lunch outside on an old wooden picnic table, picking through a couple of turkey-salad wraps and the respective ruins of our lives.

This takes a while, longer than I was expecting. So now, we have just twenty minutes to pedal four miles back to my house before the first of my kids get home. I am panting from exertion, but we're almost there.

Up ahead is the stop sign where we will part. He will turn left and cycle a mile to his car, parked at Weston Nurseries because it's too soon after the divorce to be introducing a new man to my kids.

I will turn right and coast two hundred yards to my house, where I will wheel the bike into the barn and sprint to the Adirondack chair where I wait each afternoon for the kids. Perfect timing.

Except the donkeys are in the road.

As I turn, I see them coming, my insurance agent's worst nightmare. They are a hundred yards away, galloping straight toward me: fur flying, nostrils flared, hooves clattering on uneven pavement.

Foggy is first, leading the charge; his loyal girlfriend, Jo-Jo, a few feet behind him. Together, they are 850 pounds of runaway donkey. They're not even bothering to stay in their lane.

As if on cue, I hear a couple of cars coming up behind them. I freeze. Wasn't there a scene like this in *Pet Sematary*? Something in the road, then a rumble, then a Micmac burying ground, and ultimately, nothing good ever happens again in what little bit of life you have left.

Panicking, I unclip my shoes from the bike pedals, hop off, and pitch the bike to the side of the road. Assessing the situation, I come to this conclusion: I need help. Even more help than I've needed in the past three horrible years.

Oh dear God and Mother Mary—and Moses, too, if you happen to be listening—I need policemen, and roadblocks, and an ambulance, and a horse trailer, and a jug of Merlot, some Krispy Kreme doughnuts, and a large-animal vet with a tranquilizer gun.

But the only help around is on his bike, heading the opposite way.

I turn and shriek, “*Donkeys! Donkeys in the road!*” hoping Sam will hear me, forget the agreed-upon necessity of hiding from my kids, and speed back to rescue me and my unusually long-eared pets. But all I see is the back of his blue-jean jacket, enveloping his hunched-over shoulders, as he pedals away, obliviously, calmly, back to his livestock-free car.

Moses would be more useful to me at this point. I turn back to the furry problems at hand.

The donkeys are almost upon me, and, because things can *always* get worse—don’t let anyone tell you otherwise—I realize they are not wearing their halters. This means, even if they careened to a halt right in front of me and brayed enthusiastically, “Mom! Where ya been?” I’d still have no way to catch them and lead them back home.

No matter what tales you’ve heard out of Bethlehem, donkeys don’t generally tag alongside you, like a small child or a dog. Without a halter, Foggy goes where *he* wants to, which, right now, clearly is not home.

But that oncoming-train-of-a-dilemma can wait. Right now I don’t need to get them *home*, just off the road before they cause a ten-car/two-donkey pileup that will lead on CNN.

Thanks be to Moses, the first car on the scene stops. I can’t see the driver, so I don’t know if he is amused or irate, but at least he can see what is happening. The drivers behind him can’t, and so, predictably—this being the North and all—someone leans on his horn.

This is bad, very bad. Foggy hates horns. They scare him.

Everything scares Foggy. Plastic bags, rustling leaves, birds, garbage cans, the wind, the farrier, the vet, the mailman, chipmunks, pinecones, the rate of inflation, and the neighbor’s children.

I have no time to work on my crippling emotional issues because I spend so much time trying to fix Foggy’s crippling emotional issues, which prevent him from being a good riding donkey, or a good Nativity-scene donkey, or a good donkey for anything at all. And believe me, there’s nothing quite so useless as a cowardly donkey in an industrialized nation.

But right now I’m the one who is scared. Foggy’s having the time of his life.

I stand there helplessly in the intersection and wave my hands in the air like a rookie police officer in a traffic jam, although I'm pretty sure Foggy and Jo-Jo have no respect for hand signals.

"*Stop, donkeys, stop!*" I yell, dimly aware of how stupid this sounds. Then a horrible thought comes to me. I am going to die here, run over by donkeys, surrounded by irate motorists, while the man who is not my husband pedals blithely away. A young, thin woman is going to raise my children and send the donkeys off to auction: Jo-Jo and Foggy, coming soon to a can of Alpo near you.

And dammit, I'm never going to know what it's like to stand on a bathroom scale and not cringe.

How did I get here, to this chaotic intersection? More important, how do I get out?

I close my eyes. Should I click my heels together three times? Cross myself? The donkeys are closing in. Jo-Jo is so close, I can see her drooling.

And then I hear a rumbling behind me, the screech of aging brakes.

There is a God, and he has a sick sense of humor. It's the school bus, right on time.

Have I mentioned Foggy is scared of school buses?

I steel myself to meet my fate, realizing that sometimes, even if you've done everything right, even if you lock the barn securely and double-check the stall bolts and inspect the fencing each week, disaster comes for you anyway.

Nobody knows this better than my new buddy, Steve Roland Prefontaine.

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