

“What’s the matter with her?”

At first I thought I heard the man incorrectly. No one could be that insensitive. Or could they? I focused on the horse and rider in the ring. If anyone had glanced my way, I am sure they would have witnessed my puzzled look. Perhaps I simply imagined the words spoken by the stranger at my side.

“I don’t think you heard my question” he persisted in a raised voice. “What’s the matter with her? I don’t see any disability.”

I was astonished by his words. Taking several deep breaths, I debated if I should answer. The gentleman must have noticed the stable’s logo on my shirt which matched the one on the horse’s saddle pad, and thus assumed I knew the rider. Or perhaps he had noticed me adjusting the horse’s tack prior to the test. In either event, he had made a connection between me and the rider. I decided against replying. Instead I diverted my full attention to the girl cantering by on a magnificent black and white horse. The passing motion caused a soft breeze across my face. The beautiful union of horse and rider had captivated the spectators watching that afternoon. Only those close to the girl knew the trials and tribulations it had taken for her to arrive at this moment. Only Lizzie knew the pain.

It’s funny how a conversation can bring so vividly to mind something that happened twenty years ago. I crossed paths with Abigail the other day. She was a fellow volunteer at the equestrian centre. She inquired, “Did you hear the news about Lizzie?” I felt lightheaded and I feared the worse. And that is how I came to recall this story.

All of her friends called her Lizzie, although her given name was Elizabeth. Like many young girls, she loved sports and to be in the outdoors. Baseball and swimming in the summer, and skiing in the winter were her favourites. She also loved to sing and play guitar.

The first time I saw Lizzie was downtown at a local buskerfest. There was a crowd gathered around one of the performers and I nudged my way closer to discover who the big voice belonged to. A petite girl, who could not have been more than ten or eleven years old, was belting out songs as she strummed a guitar almost bigger than she was. Her hair fell in wild, corkscrew ringlets past her shoulders. Her sparkling eyes surveyed the audience; eyes that were an unusual grey-blue violet like a bright light reflecting and shimmering off a frozen lake. Everyone in the crowd was tapping and clapping as they listened to an Ian Tyson song about

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home fries, eggs and whiskey toast. Her full volume recital held the audience captive in the palm of her wee hand.

Lizzie proved she had natural musical talent after receiving the guitar for Christmas one year. She listened to old cassette tapes belonging to her parents. Ian and Sylvia, in addition to Gordon Lightfoot, were among her favorites. Lizzie pestered her parents relentlessly until they finally agreed to let her perform at the local festival. No one listening that day would soon forget her version of “Sunshine on my Shoulders,” a song made popular by John Denver back in the day. The girl with long auburn hair had swiftly stolen the show, along with my heart.

The next time I saw Lizzie was at a riding competition. I was volunteering at a local therapeutic riding centre, one of dozens within the province governed by OnTRA – Ontario Therapeutic Riding Association. These centres offer horseback riding as a form of therapy for children and adults with a physical and / or a cognitive impairment. The benefits are not limited to improvement in muscle tone, balance, mobility and strength but they also boost the riders’ confidence and self-esteem.

Lizzie signed up for lessons not long after she discovered she had cancer.

The news had been a shock to Lizzie and her parents. The young girl who was never sick a day in her life had a swollen knee that would just not heal. Thoughts were she had injured it playing baseball or running, but when the pain increased to an unbearable level, there was cause for concern. Several doctors were consulted. After many tests, blood work, x-rays, and more tests, Lizzie and her parents were called in to a meeting. The news hit the family hard.

The test results showed there was a tumor in Lizzie’s leg. She would need chemotherapy, plus an operation was required. Her cancer was a rare form called Ewing’s Sarcoma. Lizzie was admitted to Toronto’s Hospital for Sick Children. Sick Kids.

I recall when I saw Lizzie for the first time since the buskerfest. After months of lessons, this would be her initial competition at the beginner level. She had been receiving chemotherapy but had not yet undergone the operation. She was weak and pale and had lost all of her beautiful, long hair. Her tiny frame was even smaller due to a loss in weight. The picture I viewed today was a complete juxtaposition from the previous summer. Now a wilted bloom, Lizzie was curled into the fetal position on a canvas lawn chair, in the shade of a horse trailer. I tried to ignore the hurt my heart was feeling. The attempt was unsuccessful.

Lizzie was napping when the riding instructor gently woke her. It was almost time for her test. “Are you up to riding?” the instructor inquired. She blinked, her eyes no longer showing any sign of sparkle. Then she nodded, and mustered strength to stand. Watching from a distance, I

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quietly observed nothing was going to stop this young woman from riding her beloved horse Traveller.

Traveller was a cross between a Canadian and a Paint horse. His markings were black and white and very bold. A Canadian horse is considered a rare breed. Lizzie's choice of mount was a perfect match for her own perseverance. This was a breed known to survive against the odds.

As Lizzie rode her test that day, her mother, Sharron, spoke to me. Her tale was of endless days of treatments, and long hospital stays. Sharron had quit her job to take on the task of seeing to Lizzie's care. She talked of monitoring white blood cell counts and anti-nausea drugs: the language of cancer. She told me of Lizzie's relentless quest to keep her life as normal as possible.

The cancer surgeon's final choice had been an operation called a Van Nes rotation. Sharron described how there would be a partial amputation which included Lizzie's knee and a portion of her thigh. Her calf would be rotated a full 180 degrees and the re-attached ankle would then become the knee joint. I listened intently to Sharron as she explained. This procedure was the best choice so that Lizzie could be fitted for a prosthetic leg.

Volunteers at the stables continued to keep up to date with regard to Lizzie's ongoing health issues. We were all worried. We all said daily prayers.

The months following the operation were a true testament to the strength of this young woman. There were ongoing series of operations. Appointments lasting hours were scheduled for fittings of a prosthetic leg. During those months, Lizzie became a teenager. In addition to marking her birthday with balloons and a cake, Lizzie celebrated her first step without assistance.

Lizzie was offered several opportunities through Help a Child Smile Foundation during the course of treatments. But all Lizzie wanted was to get back on her horse. Her parents were worried it was too soon, but as always, Lizzie persisted and Lizzie won. Her riding instructor and the volunteers were most accommodating to fit in a lesson between treatments, operations, and of course school work.

Today Lizzie was riding in a regional competition. Her dressage test was part of an event including riders from several other therapeutic riding centres. The day had begun in the early morning hours at the barn. Horses' legs were carefully wrapped in long, soft, polo wraps to protect them on the journey to the show in a horse trailer. After arrival at the fairground, Lizzie groomed Traveller until his coat shone. She braided his mane and then changed into her riding clothes. Tan colored breeches, black leather boots (custom made to accommodate her prosthetic

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leg), black jacket, a crisp white blouse plus a black riding helmet completed the picture of a professional equestrian.

A dressage ring is twenty metres by forty metres and has markers positioned around the arena which are visible to the rider. The markers are A, B, C, E, F, H, K and M. Markers D, X and G are not visible. X is the centre point. (Volunteers become voice / verbal markers for visually impaired riders.)

Once mounted on her steed, Lizzie made her way to the ring. She nodded, and the arena gate was swung open. I held my breath.

Enter the ring at a collected trot. Proceed to X. Halt and salute. Proceed at a collected trot. Track right. Shoulder-in right. Half-circle right 10 meters. Half-pass right. Proceed to H. Lizzie knew the test by memory.

I watched her ride. Her posture and presence portrayed confidence and the maturity of one far greater than a young girl her age. Her riding was a display of grace and poise associated with a seasoned equestrian.

Change rein medium trot. Collected trot. Proceed to K.

She rode like an Olympian. I thought of a quote a writer friend had shared with me recently. "Be kinder than necessary, for everyone you meet is fighting some kind of battle." Wow! If ever someone was fighting a battle, it was Lizzie. Yet she made it look easy and effortless.

She continued. Three-loop serpentine the width of the arena. Simple change of lead when crossing the centre line. Proceed to M. Medium canter. Collected canter.

The thud of Traveller's hooves as he and Lizzie passed by matched the beating of my heart.

Collected trot. Turn right. Turn right. Halt and Salute. Leave arena on a free walk.

Lizzie leaned forward and patted Traveller's neck as she left the arena. The applause was loud. Lizzie glanced over and smiled at me as she rode out of the ring. I felt my heart racing as I noticed that her eyes once again were sparkling like diamonds.

It was then I felt the tears streaming down my face. Someone tapped my arm. I turned to see the man who I had completely forgotten about, was still standing at my side.

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“So can you tell me now?” the man was shouting above the applause as we watched Lizzie ride off. “What’s the matter with her? She looks *normal* to me.”

I brushed some of the tears off my face. As I did, the smell of horse on my hand offered a calming scent.

Choose your words carefully, I thought to myself. This is important.

“Sir, she is normal. She is just like you and me.” I paused to take a deep breath before continuing my reply. “Lizzie lost a leg to cancer last year.” I delayed further speech to collect my thoughts. “She has overcome great obstacles in a very short period of time. Barriers bigger than mountains. Hurdles larger than anything you can imagine. I am guessing she will continue to do so.” I hesitated again. “She is one the most positive influences in my life and Lizzie is only thirteen years old.”

With no more to say, I left the man standing at the side of arena. He could be seen gripping the top rail of the board fence as if to stable himself. His foolish comments were now blown in the wind.

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Abigail was waiting for my response. I steadied myself and replied. “I haven’t heard anything about Lizzie in years.” She had watched my expression change and quickly replied, “*No*, it’s good news! She has been cancer free for years. She is living in New Zealand now and is one of the country’s top personal trainers. And guess what? She has competed in the Winter Paralympics. Lizzie has won medals for her alpine skiing. I always knew nothing was going to stop that girl!”

So did I. Lizzie’s relentless intensity was an inspiration those many years ago. Her determination plus her tenacious nature is something I will never forget.

An unfortunate few view a disability as something wrong with the individual. How fortunate Lizzie has always looked through the lens of life with a different perspective. She admirably sees only endless possibility.

Many years ago a dark cloud passed by, after which sunshine broke through. I will always remember the girl who is still in my heart. I think of Lizzie riding like the wind and I remember her singing that John Denver song. Like him, I wish for a tale to make her smile and a wish for sunshine all the while.

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