

Touched by an Angel ...

Ann used to be a college English teacher in San Antonio. Since developing severe case of Fibromyalgia, Ann and her family have moved to Uvalde, Texas, where she is living a very quiet life.

"I have lived in severe chronic pain for the last 16 years. There is no cure for my condition and no real relief from the pain that consumes my entire upper body from waistline to jawbone and down to my wrists, sleeping or waking. I had a young family, a fine education, and a great career when this medical malady began to change my life in ways so extreme that I can separate my existence at the age of 32, when I had to begin living a new, in many ways diminished life. I had to find a new way to live life in such a way as still to love the gift of being alive. It is always a struggle, but through the years I have become better at balancing myself in the struggle.

Sensory experiences become life's blood for people in chronic pain. The broken body becomes so needful of the pleasures it can take in fleeting moments - from the strains of a symphony floating through the air, the sound of mockingbirds, and cardinals in the yard, the trill of migrating geese and Sandhill cranes high in the wind-whirled sky; from the sweet smells of the blossoms of rain lilies or whitebrush blossoms or confederate jasmine, of bread baking in the oven, of the Christmas tree. Sometimes the sight of a titmouse or a house finch at the feeder or the return of the monarch butterflies in October has to be what gets me through a day. My world is very small, very open to what passes through it. Clouds and moons and stars mean a great deal more to me than they used to.

For five years I have lived in the pleasurable company of miniature donkeys, two of whom my sister and I bought as five-month-olds from Rhetta McAlister's, Country Music Miniature Donkeys farm., They are the joy, the literal joy of my life. Since I have been for many years unable to hold down a job, I spend a great deal of my life here at home, alone except for the animals, the dogs and wildlife and donkeys. And I cannot express my love for them and gratitude to them for getting me through so many long, hard days. Often, when the pain is so bad I think I cannot stand living in it one more second, and there is no exercise, no pill, no sleep to remove me from it even the tiniest bit, I go outside and call up the donkeys.

It is humbling for me to think of animals who are perfectly willing and perfectly content merely to be in my company, and to keep me company. The miniature donkeys happily will stay in my presence as long as I am there with them. I am enough for them; they love my company as much as I love theirs. Sometimes there is no medicine in heaven or on earth for me but to go out barefoot and maybe still in my pajamas in the middle of the afternoon into the pasture, call up the donkeys, and bury my face in their sweet, fuzzy, gentle faces. If I sit down on the ground they will never stop nuzzling, nudging me.

They are never bored in my presence. They have a sweet, playful curiosity that makes them interested in everything from my hair to my toes. The donkeys just take turns rubbing up against me and being rubbed and petted by me. Something in their nature makes them love human company as much as they love their own kind. The comfort I take from touching their soft muzzles and ears and darling little rumps and miniature hooves, and being touched by them, is calming, soothing, and restorative. I love their beautiful soft faces, their huge, dark, kind eyes, I love the crosses on their backs, I love the soft, soft hide of their underbellies. They seem to thrive on touch as much as I do. People invariably say to me, "Yes, they're darling, they're adorable, but what are they for?" And I answer, "They're for love." I have never had a day in which the donkeys did not get me through some part of it For adults and children with disabilities or emotional disorders, the donkeys offer complete gentleness and the comfort of a loving touch, never-failing trust and patience, unconditional love, acceptance, approval, and a certainty that at least one species of God's animal kingdom loves us not because of what they want to get from us, but just because we are.

I love sewing and weaving and embroidery and my little bottle baby Angora goat, *Ambrosia*. I love fishing and riding and rivers and music and art and the birds that come to my feeder. I love the tortoises and indigo snakes and redtail hawks and great homed owls and screech owls and caracaras and whitetail deer and armadillos and quail and bobcats and roadrunners and bunnies that inhabit his harsh land of southwest Texas. I watch them all, and listen to them and they enrich my life. I adore my dogs, my little paint mare, and my darling young palomino mule. People ask me, "In terms of pets, what's the difference between dogs and miniature donkeys?" I tell them-@ "Dogs, are human; donkeys are angels. I have angels to accompany me through the sweetest and the hardest parts of my life. They take what is hard and they transform it into sweetness and blessing."

