

How To Train Mules

by Dianne McKnight-Warren

"Daddy how do they get them to do this?" Toddy asks. He is pointing to an ad on the Kidz Page for a Diving Mule Show. It shows a mule diving into a small tank of water.

His father peers over the top of his newspaper. "They train them," he says.

"How?"

"Reward. Punishment. Something like that."

"Like what?"

"Daddy's *reading*, son."

Toddy takes the page to his mother in the kitchen. "How do they get the mules to do this?" he asks.

She's peeling potatoes at the sink, looks down. "Oh I don't know dear. Maybe they like to do it."

"Mules like to dive?"

"Maybe," she says brightly and turns and bends to open the oven, a signal for him to leave.

"Mommy says mules like to dive," Toddy says to his Dad back in the living room.

"Mommy's crazy. I'm *still reading*."

"Daddy says you're crazy," Toddy tells his Mom.

"I must be crazy to be with him," she says.

"She says she must be crazy to be with you."

"She's lucky I don't just walk out that door, son."

"Daddy says you're lucky he doesn't...."

"That was a very stupid thing for him...."

"Don't call me stupid, Esther," his father's voice calls out of the living room. He rustles his paper.

"Don't call me crazy, Hugh," she calls back.

Toddy's father comes in the kitchen. Toddy goes upstairs to his bedroom. He climbs up on his bureau, opens the window behind it. He can hear his parents voices right below him, loud, even louder when he climbs out on the cabana roof and tiptoes to the edge.

"Mules don't *like* to dive, Esther."

"I said *maybe*, Hugh. *Maybe*."

Toddy puts his arms over his head, his hands together like he's seen others do it. He bends over and dives into the pool, his first time ever. His parents scream when they see him fall. They run to fish him out of the water, wrap him in blankets. They check him over, put on his pjs. His father carries him to the couch. Toddy sits between them and eats popcorn. His parents hold hands on his shoulders, laugh at the cartoons too.

