

If you're happy and you know it

By Pia de Jong

How do you define success?

My daughter's history teacher at Princeton High School poses that question to his class. Then he tells each student to draw a poster illustrating their answer.

Charlotte goes right to work with enthusiasm. She draws a mountain of coins with an enormous gold medal on its summit. Then she adds a white house with a picket fence. Underneath it is a business card with her name engraved in script. She tops it off with a shiny red sports car.

Ah, just four years in America and totally brainwashed. But Charlotte is happy with her poster, except for one thing. "It's weird that everyone else in class drew the same thing," she says.

The next day comes the inevitable follow-up question from the teacher. How will you best achieve all those beautiful things you drew on your poster? Because he assumes that the students' parents must have helped with the poster, we are all told to work together on the answer.

And so we sit in the kitchen on Sunday afternoon watching a video of a young woman who explains in a TED lecture that success does not depend on intelligence or talent. Not test scores nor the income of your parents. No, it depends on grit, a combination of passion and perseverance. You have to work hard to achieve your goals, says the girl, who reminds me of a tiger mother. Not one day, not one month, no, year after year.

She ends her fiery speech with the motto: Live your life as if it's a marathon, not a sprint.

"Mama," asks my daughter, ready with pen and paper, "how will I become

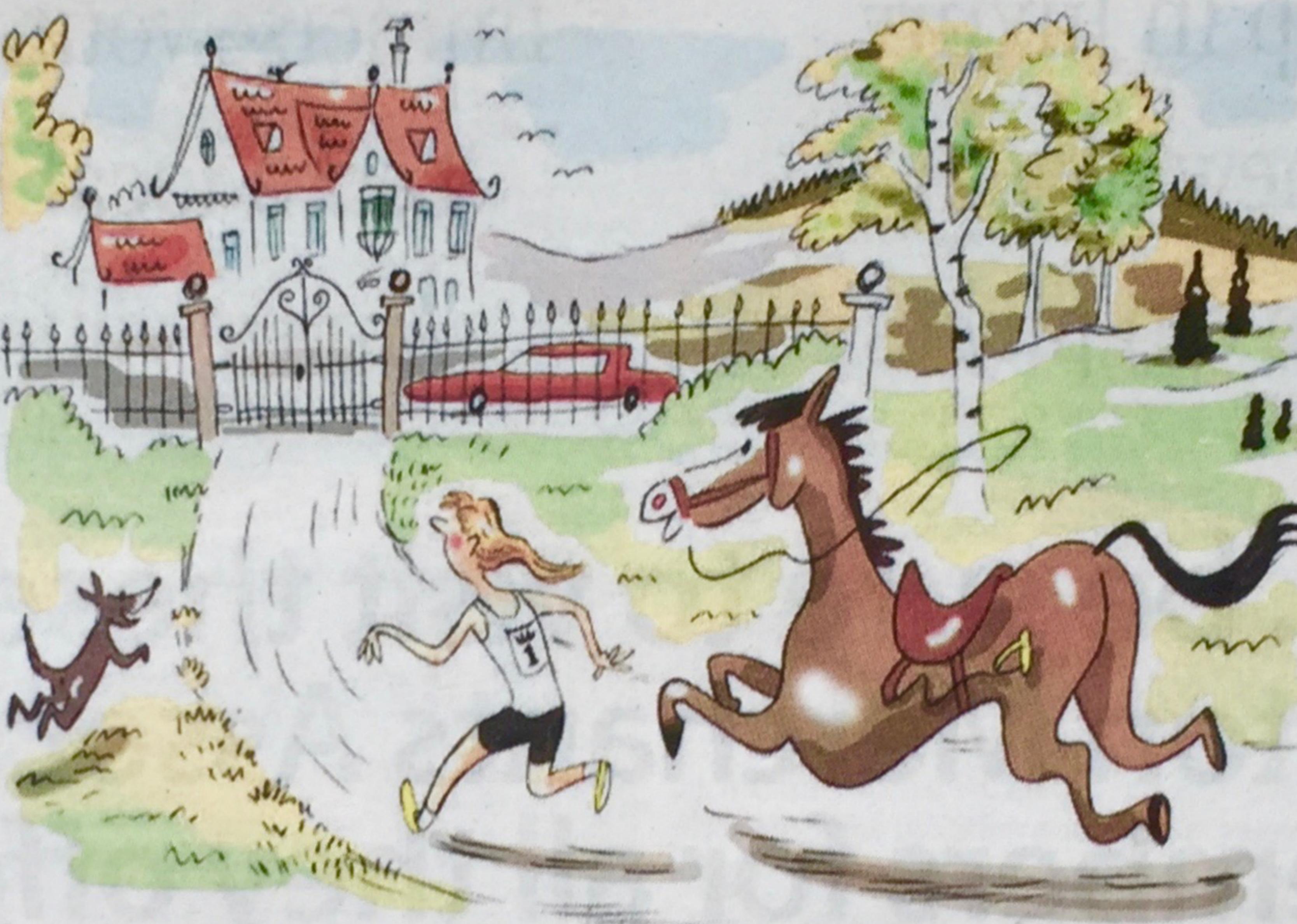


Illustration by Eliane Gerrits

successful, in your opinion?"

I look at Charlotte. She does not know yet what her passion is, so she tries to comply as closely as possible to the demands of the school. She is ready to run a marathon to achieve the images on her colorful poster — swimming in money,

living in her white house with a picket fence and a dream job.

"Honey, I think you already are successful," I say.

"I'm sure Dr. Nelson will think that's the wrong answer," she says, tugging on one of her braids.

I think she's right. A school superintendent nearby recently decided to give the kids a little less homework. It would benefit their curiosity and reduce their stress symptoms.

But immediately the tiger moms started a petition to dismiss the superintendent. They wanted someone who understood the importance of test scores, of not wasting a single day. That's only way to a good education and thus success. He backed down.

"It is not just the result," I start gently. "The road also does matter."

"Mom, I really cannot really give that answer at school," she says. "That's so typically Dutch: just be happy. No parent here is telling their kids that."

"Then what do they tell them?" I ask.

"You should always strive to be the best," she says.

"But not everyone can be the best," I say, "and, moreover, it's no guarantee of success. Perseverance is what matters."

She jumps up. "Mom, we have learned a song about that," she says, and begins to sing a song by Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers on what to do if you fail—

Just pick yourself up,
dust yourself off,
and start all over again.

"Exactly," I say. "If you fall off the horse, you should immediately get right back on it again."

"Oh, a horse!" she says. "That would look great on my poster."

Pia de Jong is a Dutch writer who moved to Princeton in 2012. Her memoir, "Charlotte," published in Amsterdam in January, is a top-10 bestseller. She can be contacted at piadejong.com.

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