

Magic Was My Horse

When I was young, I had a death wish. I wanted to die young. I thought dying would be a way to escape my problems. But I didn't want to die miserably. I wanted to die nobly. I'd always loved horses, so I thought a riding accident would be a noble death. A concussion or a broken neck would be most appropriate and kind. And so I set about trying to bring that to pass.

I loved horses, and I became determined to learn how to ride horses, despite my fear of being around them. I began taking lessons at a local stable. The manager of the stable was both an excellent horseman and riding instructor.

I was scared most of the time in those early days. Inside me, I really was afraid of horses, although I never showed it on the outside. Horses are five times stronger than humans, and they can be unpredictable, uncontrollable. It was only my love of horses that kept me going – as well as my hidden motive.

Late one evening, after one of my lessons in the riding arena, I walked by all the stalls to admire all the horses. There, inside one of the stalls, I noticed a chestnut-colored foal looking back at me attentively. I liked him from the first time I saw him. I don't know what it was. Something just clicked, and told me this was the horse for me.

Magic was my horse. He went from a foal to a wild young colt, fearful of humans, but curious as well. I had a part in his training, and for me it was a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Spirited, unruly, with a gleam in his eyes that revealed a deep reservoir of mischief lurking behind them, he was a challenge. He had no idea of what a halter was for or how to be led around by a rope. These and other simple things had to be shown him.

It was one of my duties to take him out of his stall and exercise him. This was done with a lunge line, a tough nylon rope designed for training big strong horses. Around and around in a circle he ran on his lunge line, aided by me cracking my whip.

I watch him carefully, through my own sweat-stung eyes, running and running, around and around under the hot summer sun. Held by me on the lunge line, with an occasional tug he tells me he wants to run off somewhere. But I hold fast. Often I had the heels of my cowboy boots buried in the grass against the pressure of his pull. Eventually he came to accept the lunge line without too many complaints, but I always had to be on my guard against a sudden jolt.

My first ride on Magic was dangerous. Young horses do not want you on their backs.

It was March and there was snow, so my ride had to be done inside the arena. The manager spent some time running Magic on the lunge line, to burn up some of his boundless energy. Magic was then saddled and the manager rode him for a while, to see how well Magic would obey. The manager then dismounts and cinches the saddle extra tight, and then I get on. And I am on a jolting, jostling, fearful animal, hooves thudding on the dirt floor inside the arena, and arena clouded with dust. Magic bolted whenever melted snow slid off the roof outside. He trots dangerously close to the walls, as if to knock me off. He stops too fast, almost throwing me from him onto the dirt floor below. He runs at a gallop inside the arena, with me just barely staying on. But I stayed on.

I stayed on, and in time Magic got accustomed to having me on his back, aided in part by me giving him apples after each ride. I think he went through with it all just to get the apples. Thereafter, one of my most enjoyable experiences was taking my own horse out of his stall, putting a saddle on him, and riding him, usually out in the pasture.

If you've ever ridden a horse on a bright summer day, you'll know what it's like. The smell of horse sweat and leather. Birds singing joyfully in the trees. Sunshine dancing in your eyes. The green grass, and the vast blue sky open before you. At a gallop, there is a wild wind in your face, and the strong, powerful horse racing you over the land, and an ecstatic feeling of freedom.

Horse and rider become one. The rider gives his commands through the reins and through his legs, and the horse obeys. But it's more than that. Somehow, there is a mental bonding between the mind of a man and a horse. Somehow we can understand each other.

All the tedious hours of training have their payoff here. All the bitter cold winter evenings spent exercising the horse in the arena, all the hot, humid days with mosquitoes thick around you and him, all of the near-accidents, the frustration when the horse stubbornly disobeys, all these things are forgotten here.

These things are forgotten. But not forgotten was the gentle spring day when I sat in my car and wrote out Magic's bill of sale, and walked with Magic for one last walk around the arena where we had spent so much time together. Selling Magic was like losing a friend. It was a sad parting. But life is growth and growth is change, and we can't stop it.

And so it was that my death wish never came true. I never even fell off Magic – or any other horse – not even once, even though I gave myself many opportunities to do so. Instead, I became an expert horseman, confident, and able to ride a horse with skill.

In the hard, hard world of real-life experience, I had learned the courage that marks my life even to this day. I had learned to make each day count, because each day is important to us. We may not have tomorrow. I could see easily enough how I was teaching Magic, altering his life forever. But not so apparent was how he was teaching me, altering my life, too.

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