

Memoir

by

Ally McConchie

Mrs. Pugh

Period 3

20 October 2011

Ever since I was little, I'd dream about having a bond with a horse like people did on movies, such as War Horse. I just wanted one to call my own and be able to trust it completely. It was nine years into my life before my mom gave into my sister, Amy, and mine begging. In October 2007, we bought a registered Quarter Horse named Tango. But me being nine, Tango being untrained and having trust issues, Mom wouldn't let me ride him. But Amy being eleven, got to do everything with him.

That was alright because in February 2009, Mom bought me my own horse, one that was already trained. Jenny was a stocky, varnished roan Appaloosa. She was fourteen years old, was 100% blind in her right eye, and had a bad knee, compliments to the cow that had kicked her. It never bothered her and she was used to being half blind, so I immediately began riding her.

It was so thrilling to say, "That's my horse," and be able to care for her and love her. She accepted my company, but she had a side to her that she would keep to herself. She stood alone in the pasture, wouldn't come see me, and only wanted company if you went to her. That was fine with me as I'd go out and see her every free second.

Come February 2010, we heard of a clinic on Natural Horsemanship being hoisted fifteen minutes from our house. It was all about getting my horse to trust me. I was ecstatic when Mom agreed to let Amy and I take Tango and Jenny.

I sat on the edge of my seat as we drove up with the trailer. I was practically bouncing the whole time. As soon as we got there, I was at the back of the trailer and unloading Jenny. We happily joined the other nine horses there, all huddled up by the round pen to hear what Pam, the instructor, was going to say.

“We’re going to start with Join-Up today,” Pam shouted over the bitter winds. “This is a trust exercise created by Monty Roberts to help your horse accept you as their leader.”

The first pair went into the small, circular round pen. I watched intently as she took the halter off her horse and began sending him around the pen. She used quiet commands and stood in the centre, flicking a whip when her horse slowed down. This went on for ten minutes.

“Okay,” Pam started, getting our attention. “See how his inside ear is pointed at her? That means he’s listening to her,” Pam explained, telling us the key signs to Join-Up. “Now you can see his head lowering, dropping his eyes below hers. If you listen, you can hear him snorting, meaning that he’s comfortable here. And last, if you watch his mouth, you’ll see him licking and chewing; this means he’s ready to Join-Up.”

The lady dropped the whip and turned her back to the horse. I watched, amazed as the horse stopped running and walked to her, touching his nose to her back. She then took a few steps away, and her horse eagerly followed.

After her, most of the other people went. I quickly got bored and impatient, and stopped paying attention after a few. When it was finally our turn, I lead Jenny into the ring.

Shaking mostly from the cold and partly over all the people watching, I unclipped Jenny’s halter and dropped it at my feet. She moved away as I picked up the well-worn whip, and sent her into a canter. She ran circles and circles around me with her head held high for a long time. I thought for sure we’d never get a Join-Up.

But then she changed directions. I recalled what Pam had said earlier about not letting them pick the direction, so I began to move out in front of her to send her back the way she came.

“No, leave her,” Pam called.

I did, unsure why, but let Jenny canter in the opposite direction. Faintly, I could hear Pam explaining something to the audience, but I was too focused on Jenny to listen. Slowly, she began lowering her head and twitching her ear.

“Try now,” Pam said, smiling.

I dropped the whip and turned my back, certain that she’d keep running. I listened to her footsteps soften, then stop, then start again over the crisp, frozen ground. A rush of shivers went up my spine as her nose touched my back. I spun around and stroked her, her breath forming misty clouds in my hands. I backed away a few steps, and she followed. Overjoyed, I turned and we walked all over the pen. I couldn’t help but smile the whole time; it was incredible.

Later on, as we were wrapping up the day in the huge, three-story farm house, Pam started to explain what she hadn’t earlier. “I don’t know if you noticed or not, but the whole time Jenny had her good eye on you, so she could watch what you were doing, but when she changed directions, she was letting you be her other eye and putting her life in your hands. That’s a huge step for any horse, especially one who isn’t very friendly and at that age. Overall, I think you two got the best Join-Up I’ve ever seen,” Pam smiled.

I was speechless. I didn't know it was a big deal for a horse to give up their sight to a person. I thought back to all the times I'd try getting Jenny to change directions so her blind eye was on me at home, and getting so frustrated when she wouldn't, that I'd sit on the ground and throw rocks at a fence post. And just a few hours earlier, she'd willingly did it. I couldn't think of anything more perfect than my horse trusting me with her life.

But on June. 30, 2012, I made the hardest decision of my life. After Jenny going lame due to arthritis in her knees and losing her sight in her other eye, we had her put down. Saying goodbye to her was the most difficult thing I've ever done. But I'll always remember all the good things about her and how she was the best teacher, friend and mentor I could have ever asked for. I know I'll never be able to look at another horse without comparing it to Jenny.