

Horse
of a Different Color

by
Sandra Ruscin De Vonish

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Dedication

In loving memory of Deborah Peet, the best buddy a person—or horse—could ever have had. Debbie loved the horses with all her heart, and she poured her very soul into the ranch for many years. Although Debbie was already ill when I embarked upon my writing endeavor, she eagerly assisted me even from her hospital bed, providing facts, figures and recollections. Debbie's enthusiasm for life and for all living things—whether two-footed or four-footed—knew no bounds. When anyone needed a friend, she was there, encouraging and bolstering—while denying herself—right up to the moment she escaped her earthly confines. This is for you, Debbie. I only wish you were here to enjoy the completed book.

You are fondly remembered.

As well, I dedicate this book to Snapper, who is no longer a *living* legend, yet will remain a legend always in the hearts of many. Snapper took his leave just as my project wound to a close, so he's on Debbie's ranch now. His departure left a space in my heart yet to be filled. We will ride another day, good friend, and again my tears will fall—but from the wind in my face as we fly.

Acknowledgements

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Thank you, Curtis, my dear husband and best friend, for your patience, suggestions and encouragement along the way—as well as your forfeiture of PC time as I monopolized the computer.

Thank you, Terry Ruscin, for your editorial insights, particularly truncation. (And I'll leave it at that.)

Many, many thanks to the wonderful folks listed below, for furnishing equine anecdotes—whether knowingly or unwittingly—and for being good sports about it.

Contributors who are contemporary affiliates: Alex, Bobby, Breezie, Cody, Corey, Connor, Erik, Frani, Kathy, Lee-1, Lindsey, Lisa, Melinda, Mike L., Missy, Natalie, Sal, Sam, and Victor

Contributors whom the horses have also loved: A.J., Ann, Bethany, Bob, Brad, Catlin, Chris, Craig, Dale, Damon, Debbie, Denise, Francine, Gary, Gary W., Harvey, Jackie, Jamie, Jason, Jeff, Jenna, Jenny, J.D., John, Julia, Julie, Kari, Kristen, Kyle, Lauren, Lynda, Marco, Michelle, Mike M., Neil, Nick, Peggy, Rachel, Rob, Sam, Stevie-C, Tiffany and Walter

And my heartfelt appreciation to all the others who have cared for the horses throughout the years.

Foreword

The most difficult aspect of creating this book was deciding where and when to wrap it up. Each day, new adventures occur, while vintage recollections continue to surface. (There just may have to be a sequel someday.) All in all, it was a memorable undertaking, and I look forward to holding the completed work in my hands. After more than a year of recalling, observing, writing, listening, querying, gathering, editing, inserting, revising, correcting, stepping back to regain perspective, re-organizing, photographing, typing and graphic designing, I have declared the project concluded.

Chances are, you will notice within the text, references to horses via the use of relative pronouns “who” and “whom” rather than the word “that.” Such instances are intentional and not an error. Grammar recommendations be danged. The horses are our friends and warrant our respect. The word “that” should be reserved for inanimate objects—and okay, lower life forms like insects and worms.

If you have a desire to look up the antics of a particular horse, leaf to the index at the back of the book where you will find a list of the horses’ names. It is, by no means, a complete listing from all the years, but I did my best. And where the text includes mentions of a particular horse, the relevant page numbers are next to the horse’s name in the index. With respect to horses with no affiliated page number, unfortunately the index listing is their only mention.

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Introduction

Suddenly airborne, I hovered aloft, gripping the saddle horn with all my might. Struggling to remain astride, I arched my back in protest and a frantic cry escaped my throat. At last realizing my efforts were in vain, I released my death grip on the pommel—for Dad won the contest of wills as he pried me from the pony's back—after my very first ride.

As I had yet to reach my second birthday on the day my horse obsession took root, this recollection stems from my dad's memory banks. The year was 1954. Dad was 22 years old, six feet tall, slender, and he sported raven hair reminiscent of a 1950s Elvis Presley—complete with a curl in the middle of his forehead. To perfect the look, he wore a cigarette pack rolled up in his white tee shirt sleeve.

My steed was a pony at the local annual carnival—an event dubbed the Fall Festival for reasons unknown, as the fair graced our town in the *summertime*, each August. Tethered to a central shaft, the ponies ambled in a tight circle. Around and around they trudged while passersby enjoyed cotton candy and popcorn as they meandered to or from a Ferris wheel ride, a ring-toss game or a cakewalk.

As I had never before been close to a horse, Dad feared his tow-headed tyke might be frightened of a creature so large. To his surprise, it was love at first sight.

Dad strolled beside me with his hand on my waist—while my chubby fingers gripped the saddle horn. A broad grin took up residence on my face as the brown-and-white pony sauntered, brushing flies from its hindquarter with a blur of whisking tail.

When Dad wrested me from the pony's back, my tragic whimpering touched his heart and secured me a

second ride. An ear-to-ear grin was promptly restored to my face, although tears still glistened in my eyes.

I grew up in a small town and, despite its size, Altoona, Wisconsin, was to my dismay, still a town—not a ranch or a farm. I was fortunate, though, to have grandparents and aunts and uncles who lived on dairy farms, and we visited some Sunday afternoons.

“Please, please take me to the barn to see the horsies!” I begged Grandpa Nasset, when I was only four—and a lifetime memory crystallized. To my ultimate glee, he tossed me up onto a giant draught horse—a comical sight, no doubt, for my legs stuck out straight to the sides.

Henceforth my unfailing response, when asked what I wanted for a birthday gift, was, “A horse!” I knew I would not receive one, but the question posed to me was, *What would you like for your birthday?* Not—*What do you think you’ll receive?* And I responded honestly. If I couldn’t have a horse, there wasn’t an adequate substitute. I did not comprehend the time and money required to maintain a horse, and I had not been born to a family of means.

Fast-forwarding to age ten, I saved my allowance each week until I had purchased all six ceramic horses from Koplein’s neighborhood store. My inanimate equines cost seventy-nine cents each, and my allowance—only twenty-five cents a week. Whenever I had amassed sufficient funds, I mounted my clunky, one-speed Schwinn and pedaled one mile to the store, crossing my fingers in hopes no one else had bought any of my precious horses.

Yes, I could cross my fingers while riding for I was one with my bike, as I did not have a horse, after all. And—I could ride “no-handed” indefinitely with my arms folded across my chest.

To my relief, no one else showed an interest in my ceramic herd. I raced into the store, all pigtails and pedal-pushers, without a thought for the candy counter or comics

stand. I detoured down the first aisle, straight to the back of the store. The fragile horses patiently waited on a glass shelf until I had acquired them all. My herd included a prancing buckskin, a grazing paint, a reposing bay, a proud chestnut, a rearing black and a high-tailed gray.

Sympathetic to my horse obsession, Dad crept into my bedroom one night after I had been tucked in.

“Sandy, get up. There’s a rodeo on TV,” he whispered.

I bounded from bed. With my hair wound tightly in bobby-pinned curls, I followed Dad to the living room—with a double take for Mom’s reaction to this bedtime violation. Her expression was neutral as she perched on the sofa, concentrating on her clicking knitting needles. Hopping onto Dad’s lap, I remained silent, so as not to draw undue attention and risk being sent back to bed.

Dad and I shared his recliner as we watched barrel racing, trick riding and calf roping on the old black-and-white set. I don’t know which was more satisfying: watching the rodeo, or the privilege of staying up when my brothers were in bed.

And what a thrill—each rare occasion when I had the opportunity to ride.

One weekend, my cousin Karen and I stayed at our Aunt Marvel’s house, and Marvel planned a treat for us. She called the Fennerhans, a family who owned horses, and inquired about riding. Lanna Fennerhan said she and her friend Sue would be happy to take us.

I was ecstatic, prancing on my beautiful mount—down the street, over a bridge and through the woods. Then Lanna asked if we wanted to go faster. “Sure,” we replied. Without further warning, she kicked her horse up to a trot. Naïvely, I was caught off guard when my horse followed suit. We were off, trotting briefly, moving into a canter and zigzagging among the trees. Not the best idea for novices

like my cousin and me, yet our leader at age 15 was a kid herself, and didn't think of that.

My horse sailed between two trees, and I whacked my left foot. I wound up with a sprained ankle, but I didn't let it spoil my fun. I finished the ride without mentioning it.

When I dismounted, however, a surge of pain coursed through my ankle and brought me up short. Oops. I was injured more than I realized. Though I tried my best to walk without a limp, my gait resembled a greenhorn's bowlegged swagger. At least that's what Aunt Marvel thought, and I was not about to admit otherwise. It wasn't until we reached my aunt's house that she noticed how much my ankle had swollen, and I had to 'fess up.

As time wore on, childhood dreams were increasingly relegated to the past, and I settled into the routine of adulthood, riding only rarely and relishing each occasion.

When I met my husband Curtis, we hit it off because we had many interests in common, especially horses.

As a child, with a passion for the Lone Ranger and all movie westerns, Curtis had longed to be a cowboy. When later he became a police officer, he applied for the mounted division. This specialized unit had a lengthy waiting list, and Curtis remained hopeful he would be selected.

Years into his tenure, Curtis was injured. After two bouts of reconstructive surgery, he left on a disability retirement. Concurrently, approval came down for the mounted division. He couldn't believe the unfortunate timing as his dreams were shattered along with his shoulder. The position went to the next officer in line.

Curtis's and my commonalities included not only a love of horses, but abandonment of a dream—or in Curtis's case, the dream abandoned him. A turn of events was overdue.

###

A Dream Come True

As horse lovers, we were on a singular mission. Visiting riding stables in Pennsylvania, Curtis and I were disappointed with the single-file, nose-to-butt riding style. When I steered my horse out of line, nudging him into a faster gait to ride near Curtis, our guide bellowed, “Get back in line!”

Well then, that’s not riding.

Dining out one evening, we struck up a conversation with local folks, inquiring about places to truly ride.

The response was a resounding, “Triple W Stables—it’s not follow-the-leader. It’s just what you’re looking for.”

That was 15 years ago and the beginning of an era. For ten years, we frequented Triple W as customers, honing our riding skills, meeting many skillful instructors, and making the acquaintance of several horses including Angus, Scooter, Ticket, Apache, Shatter, Queenie, Tempest and Swany.

In 2001, tragedy struck, with Curtis’s heart attack. Multiple procedures over several months, followed by a lengthy recuperation period, forced a two-year hiatus. Lack of activity exacerbated Curtis’s arthritis to a debilitating degree. Cabin fever, however, imposed an emotional strain more devastating than his physical ailments. We missed our formerly active lifestyle and were itching to get back to living.

“It won’t be easy,” Curtis lamented, “but I’m not ready for a rocking chair. I want to ride again. After all, the hard part will be mounting. Once up, all I have to do is sit there.”

Off we went, on a refreshing April day. We were thrilled to return to the gorgeous 191-acre ranch, nestled in

the mountains with trails through woods and fields, past ponds and lakes.

With a whimsical breeze ushering fresh mountain air into our lungs with each lengthy inhalation, we came alive, as if waking from hibernation. Adrenaline coursed through our bodies as we approached the stables with its signature white wooden fencing. What a terrific day.

From the Triple W parking lot, the sight of the ranch house bed & breakfast stirred fond memories of our overnight stays, having feasted upon Doris's delicious full country breakfasts while enjoying tales of her Native American Lenni Lanape heritage.

Initially a family farmhouse, circa late 1800s, the inn was constructed with natural stonework augmenting white siding. In the 1970s, when the bed-and-breakfast business sprang to life, the original structure was doubled in size, providing a large dining room and additional guest rooms.

The next major improvement, shortly after the turn of the millennium, replaced the building's white siding with logs, furthering its rustic authenticity. The B&B is steps away from the corral where the horses spend their days.

We strolled toward the stables office—a quaint 150-year-old, natural stone structure that was once the farm's milk house. Greeted enthusiastically with hugs from Kevin, Susanne, Debbie, Peggy and Harvey, we caught up on each other's lives before we were assigned horses to ride.

No simple task—assigning a horse to a rider at Triple W Stables is a detailed process wherein each rider is interviewed to ascertain level of riding experience, physical limitations, expectations and comfort level. The ranch accommodates riders from novice to advanced, assigning horses accordingly. Safety is a priority, and operational routines are the result of years of fine-tuning. No procedure is without a purpose. That said, however, there is no such

thing as perfection or total predictability when working with animals—as several anecdotes will reveal.

For our ride, Curtis was assigned Shatter, a gelding once king of the herd and sire to several foals. Curtis mounted with difficulty, requiring assistance and landing on Shatter's back with a pained expression on his face. Once mounted, Curtis looked uncomfortable, albeit determined to do this.

“We have a terrific horse for *you*,” Debbie told me excitedly. I was assigned Venus, one of Shatter's offspring. Young and recently trained, Venus was rated high-level rent-able—for experienced riders. She's a sensitive horse requiring a soft touch—and she captured my heart.

At the close of an exhilarating day, we were determined to heed their advice—*Don't be strangers*—and we became regular riders again. For Curtis it was the perfect physical therapy.

By Labor Day, we found ourselves recruited as volunteers, lending a hand at the stables with all aspects of chores. With an opportunity to further our riding experience, we graduated to increasingly higher-level horses—eventually attaining seniority as the stables' most seasoned guides and instructors. A dream come true.

We have come to know upwards of 60 horses, well enough to realize each horse has a unique personality and is special in his own way. Although I am no horse expert, but merely a horse lover, I know horses are intelligent, and they will let you know this instantly, if you have doubts. Their emotions run the gamut from playfulness and affection to jealousy, stubbornness, and even embarrassment. They have a sense of humor, and they particularly enjoy when humans are the butt of their jokes.

As my acquaintance with the Triple W horses grew, I couldn't help but put my experiences in writing. The horses' antics cry out for preservation. For their personalities and

stories to be lost in the winds of time would be a shame. And when I mentioned my project to others at the ranch, they rallied around, eager to add their stories. So fellow horse lovers, turn the page and enjoy the sagas of several of our equine friends.

###

Venus

A goddess in our midst



Baby Venus with Mama Brandy

Accompanying a family of four on a leisurely instructional ride served as a pleasant way to wind down at the end of a satisfying day. After my last trail, I chatted briefly with the riders before they departed, commending their ten and eleven year-old daughter and son on the improvement they had shown in their riding skills during a one-hour ride. The proud parents were tickled to hear me confirm their children's progress, and the kids were eager to find out when they could come back again. As they took their leave with smiles on their faces, it brought to mind the sense of euphoria *I'd* felt when learning to ride.

Near the end of an unexpectedly busy day at the stables, I was happy and weary. The temperature was unseasonably delightful for Thanksgiving week, and visitors to the region had taken advantage of it. After we unsaddled the horses, I climbed up on the hitching post railing and hopped onto Venus's back—to relax for a spell. Astride the goddess, I lay back, my head atop her hindquarters—

fingers laced behind my neck. I could easily have dozed off—except just then Kevin, the stables’ lanky proprietor, jogged over with Venus’s bridle in hand.

“Want to ride her bareback? My wife and Corey are going out for a while.”

“Sure,” I said, and quickly added, “I thought I’d have to start with Eclipse or Nova for my trial bareback ride.” I had ridden bareback only twice—and it had been 20 years.

“You’ll be fine,” he returned. “You’ll only be walking through the woods. No fields. Enjoy.”

Kevin instills confidence in his staff. He knows the horses and he assesses his guides’ skills, so if he thinks I’m ready, then I too assume I am. Confidence, after all, is 90 percent of achievement.

Perfect timing too, as it was my birthday. What a wonderful gift. Susanne rode Walker, Corey rode Sequoia—and we wound up trotting after all—once I felt comfortable enough to try it. Since Venus’s trot is smooth, I had no trouble. Afterward, I was pleased with my accomplishment.

Seemingly out of nowhere, though, Victor appeared—our leprechaun-esque farrier and former trail guide.

“Hold on there a minute,” he chuckled, stretching out the words in his relaxed manner of speaking. “I remember the ride when you couldn’t stay on Venus—even *with* a saddle,” he chuckled—eager, I suppose, to make sure my head didn’t swell too much.

The truth be known, however, he and I *both* came off our horses on that ride, while my horse was merely ambling slowly—and while his was standing still.

During my first month as a volunteer, I accompanied Victor as his assistant guide on a trail with ten customers. I rode Venus—he rode Asahd, a beautiful white Arabian. And, I must say, Victor was the *first* to hit the dust. I had asked for his assistance adjusting my stirrup, as I had yet to master the task myself while mounted. Victor likes to