

Duchess
By Helen Peppe

I was twelve years old, one of nine kids, from a family with no money. I was certain, however, that if I called every person in the paper who had a horse for sale that at least one of them would welcome payments of a dollar a week, my allowance. I was also certain that if I was to have horse I was going to have to get it myself. I can remember how my heart beat rapidly, how my stomach felt jittery, and how my voice trembled. I did not ask a thing about the horses. It was a horse. I was going to love it, and it was going to love me. All I did was ask, as soon as someone said “hello”, is if they would be interested in a dollar a week payments. I was rejected, over and over again.

I clearly remember my frustration, but also my determination. I continued my pathetic calls and then, amazingly, a woman said she would let me lease her horse in exchange for babysitting. I felt absolutely sick to my stomach but elated in a way I had never been before. I invited her to bring the horse over immediately, gave her directions, and hung up. After our conversation, I realized that I didn't have a stall, a fenced in area, or permission from my parents. That day I begged in a way that only an obnoxious horse loving girl can beg. Probably out of desperation for silence, my parents agreed to let me keep the horse in the backyard. As an adult, I look back and question my parents' concern for my safety.

Her name was Duchess, a chestnut Standardbred. To me she was the most beautiful horse in the whole world. In reality, she was thin, with a huge head, boney with a dull coat. Her owner did not have a horse trailer, so she rode the horse up my driveway, got off, and handed me, a completely inexperienced twelve year old, the reins. She told me that Duchess was fast and often took off with a buck so I would probably want to hang on to the saddle horn. She added that I would have to get into the saddle quickly as Duchess didn't like to stand still but took off when she felt weight in the stirrup. I was so overwhelmed with gratitude that I was too stupid to feel fear. I simply could not wait to ride.

My mother gave the woman a ride back to her home after I gave promises of infinite babysitting. I had Duchess' reins in my hand. I was in shorts and barefoot. I had no food (fortunately it was summer and there was lots of grass), no grooming supplies, no tack beyond the saddle and the bridle on the horse. I did not know about farriers, worming, or that veterinarians were for anything beyond emergencies. I definitely did not know that helmets existed. Before the dust settled on the dirt road, I led Duchess to the middle of my yard, let her put her head down to graze, and quickly got into the saddle. She took a few quick steps without lifting her head from the grass. The stirrups were way too long, but I did not care. I laid down over Duchess' withers and neck and hugged her as she chewed and walked. I was blissfully happy.

From that day, I hardly left Duchess' side. Most of my time was spent patting, brushing, and talking to her. The first time I attempted to ride her, the western saddle that I had frantically struggled to lift onto her back and fasten, rolled down her side when I stepped in the stirrup. She kicked out and took off with the saddle dragging under her stomach, the stirrups bumping against the ground. I raced after her and took her saddle off as she stomped and blew, (Again, I question how much my parents loved me) collecting the tangled reins. Then I led her to the play gym and got on her bareback. She moved forward suddenly, with me clinging to her neck, but only for a few feet before she threw her head down and angrily ripped chunks of grass and dirt out of the lawn. I tried to pull her head up with the reins, but after only a few yanks, one of the reins fell off. So I slid off, removed the bridle, put Duchess' halter back on, hooked two uneven pieces of rope to her halter, and got back on.

It is here in my story that, as an adult, I would expect terrible things to happen. Surprisingly, once it was just me and the halter, Duchess walked wherever I asked her to go. Sometimes she would turn and look at my feet, but mainly she just walked. Being twelve, however, I wanted to go faster, so I clucked and nudged her with my bare heels. I was taken completely by surprise, hanging onto her neck with all my strength as half my body slid down her side. Her spine was incredibly bony and her trot was incredibly

uncomfortable. Over the summer I learned how to sit her trot and her canter and later her gallop. Duchess never bucked, reared, took off, or treated me dangerously in any way. I lived so far out in the country that I did not fence her in. I did make her a stall in our small barn, but she chose to stay outside.

Duchess' owner decided to leave her with me over the winter. I learned first hand about pushing manure in a wheelbarrow through deep snow. It was miserable going out before school and again at night to feed and clean her in the dark, alone, hearing the coyotes howl in the distance. I was in debt to my parents for the grooming supplies I had bought over the summer, and now I went into further debt for the expense of hay. I bought grain and gave her half a coffee can in the morning and at night. I have no idea how I decided that amount. The owner never told me a thing. Duchess did, however, fill out so that her head did not look quite so huge. The owner decided to let her stay with me, and I kept Duchess for two years.

Then one morning the owner called saying she wanted to take Duchess back. That afternoon Duchess was gone. I was devastated. I could not stop crying. There was no invitation to come and see her whenever I wanted. There was nothing until several months later there was a notice in the newspaper that a horse had been hit by a drunk driver and killed. The pain that I had felt watching Duchess go down the road away from my home after two years was nothing to the pain I felt when my mother told me that she had been hit by a car. The loss and anger were unbearable.

As an adult, I now recognize the situation for what it was. I am amazed at the owner's neglect and callousness. Duchess was given to a child who knew absolutely nothing but gave her all the love a young girl could give a horse. I rode her bareback hundreds of miles through the woods, fields, and on dirt roads with just a halter and hay rope. I have had several horses that I have loved immensely as an adult, but none that have ever matched the partnership that Duchess and I shared. I have to think it was the result of countless hours spent hanging out with her that as adults we just do not have. Duchess never left my unfenced yard in those two years I had her. Sometimes I think she broke

through the fence in her owner's yard, on the day she was killed, in an attempt to get back to my house. No one will ever know, but the thought breaks my heart.

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