

The Horse of My Heart

Stories of the Horses We Love

Edited by
Callie Smith Grant



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Introduction

Callie Smith Grant



As a younger adult I moved around for my work, and for a couple of years, I lived in New York City. While there, I participated in a writers' group where every member was a native New Yorker except me. I was the lone country girl.

The advice of the day to young writers was, *Write what you know*. So I often wrote about growing up in the country. One day I brought to the group a story about feeding the horses on dark winter mornings. The other writers liked the piece, but they were surprised by it. "Where are the adults in this story?" one asked. "Why are children handling those huge animals with no adults around?"

That's hard to answer if people aren't familiar with horses. The fact that horses are large is not the whole story. Anyone who has had horses or worked around them knows they are potentially dangerous, yes. But horses are complicated. They are prey animals who look to their humans—even human

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children—for care and safety. I remember as a child being very aware that these big beasts trusted me and did my bidding, and I was amazed by it. The fact that we ride horses means we have a very different relationship with these herd animals than we have with a house pet.

Fully exploring the human-horse relationship is beyond what I can do. I'll let the contributing writers tell those stories. There are stories here from both men and women, and I learned that more women than I ever imagined wanted horses when they were girls. (Raise your hand if you collected Breyer model horses!)

These remarkable stories run the gamut from the intimate friendships between human and horse to seeing a horse as a metaphor for some aspect of one's life. Some horses in these stories show up at the right time—to help a healing man gain strength, help a woman move on after grief, help a young man feel capable, even help people in hospitals. Horses aid a child with anxiety or another child who won't speak. Some horses provide an opportunity to learn something new—how to handle bullies, how not to judge by appearance, how to trust.

Sometimes the horse's strong, steady presence helps people adjust to life changes or helps a teenager stumble through adolescence. Sometimes the helping is mutual—rescue the horse and the horse rescues you back. In a few stories, the horse is background or a symbol for a whole other experience. And you'll meet another equine—a sweet-natured donkey whose surprise appearance helps a family laugh through the tough times.

I hope you enjoy these stories as much as I've enjoyed collecting them. Now let's join the storytellers in this book and have a closer look at some of the most magnificent animals in creation.

The Pasture Bully

Susy Flory



Of the horses I've known and loved, Harry was my favorite. I used to have an elderly friend who had many dogs and loved them all, but she had one special little dog who was “the dog of her heart,” and she said you only get one in a lifetime. Well, Harry was the horse of my heart. A gelding, he was a shiny black beauty with a long flowing mane and tail, a soft, gentle heart, and a mischievous gleam in his eye.

Whenever Harry heard me approach, he always tilted his head, then bobbed it up and down with a friendly nicker, eyes bright. He was easy to catch but not easy to keep tied to the hitching post—he was a master at untying the knots in the lead rope when you weren't looking and then wandering away to snatch a few mouthfuls of grass. When I caught up, he always looked innocent. “Who, me?” You'd almost believe it was an accident if you didn't see the twinkle in his eye.

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Even though he was mischievous, Harry got along well with the other horses, including the pasture bully, a big-boned white Appaloosa with a smattering of tiny, red spots. Her name was Mesa, and she had a first-class bad attitude. Mesa was quick to lay her ears flat against her head and fix an angry glare at whoever was blocking her way to the feed box, the water trough, or her preferred patch of grass. The other horses knew to stay out of her way when she wanted something, because she wasn't above striking out with a back hoof or baring her teeth and biting whoever was in the way. The other horses just let her do whatever she wanted.

Harry finessed the situation, though. He avoided her when she was on the rampage and waited until she was otherwise occupied to sneak in and grab some hay for himself. He never confronted Mesa head-on. Harry was too smart for that.

One day, when I was about ten years old, my dad told me the best news ever—our quarter horse mare had just given birth to a beautiful foal. Dad, my sister, and I raced to the stable and quietly watched the new baby nestled in the straw, her proud mama licking and nudging her. We immediately named her Honey to match her rich, red-gold coat and watched through a window into the stall as Honey stretched her legs and awkwardly tried to stand. Foals are all legs, and those long spindly legs seem to bend in all directions when they're first born. Honey tried to stand, then collapsed, then tried again. Eventually her legs worked, and she got her first taste of warm milk, her curly tail wiggling in delight.

Every day after school, I hurriedly grabbed my backpack to race home to see Honey. But most afternoons I faced my own bully. One of the boys in my class used to hide behind a fence and wait for me, then jump in front of me and kick me in the

shins before laughing and running away. I was tall for my age, but he was taller. I tried to outrun him, but he'd just run after me and give me a shove. I didn't know what to do, so I took the kicks, then ran home.

Honey was curious and quickly grew tame, allowing me to stroke her neck and back while she leaned against me, snuggling into my side. But within a month the snuggling was over, and Honey was scampering around the stall, jumping and playing and driving her poor mama crazy. My dad decided it was time to let the pair out into the pasture, where mother and daughter could stretch their legs.

On the appointed day, Harry, Mesa, and the other horses were up high on the hill, grazing peacefully in the spring sunshine when Dad released Honey and her mother into the pasture. Honey stayed close by her mom, and they slowly wandered across the base of the hill. We watched as the rest of the horses looked up, watched the release, then went back to grazing. Horses came and went from the pasture all the time, so the herd didn't pay much attention, especially if there was no hay involved.

We had just turned to leave when we heard a loud neigh, then a squeal. "Dad, what is that?" I yelled. We ran back to the gate and tried to see what was going on. *Mesa!* We looked in horror as Mesa, now at the bottom of the hill, ran back and forth in front of mother and baby, stirring up dust and screeching. When a horse screeches, it's never good news. Mesa's legs were stiff as she charged back and forth, her tail stuck out at an odd angle like a battle flag. Her ears were back and she made sharp, jabbing motions with her head. She wasn't yet within striking distance, but she was close.

Honey, clearly terrified, was hiding behind her mom, who trotted nervously back and forth, mirroring Mesa's movements.

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My dad rushed over to the fence and waved his arms, trying to scare Mesa off. “Mesa, get out of here. NOW!” he shouted.

The mare wheeled around, angrily flipped her tail, and ran back up the hill. Honey and her mom also took off running along the fence line at the bottom of the hill away from us. My sister and I started crying, sure that our precious baby foal was going to die at the angry hooves and teeth of the massive spotted horse. Dad rushed back toward us and opened the gate while we screamed, “Daddy! Daddy! Please help Honey!”

At the top of the hill, Mesa trotted around, back and forth, then headed down toward the right. She still looked like she was on the warpath. Then it happened. The other horses, who’d been staying out of the fray at the top of the hill near the trees, parted, and out trotted Harry. He crossed over in front of Mesa but never once looked at her. He slowed to a walk, then headed purposefully down the hill to the right. My dad saw the black figure moving toward Honey and her mama and stopped to watch at the gate.

Harry’s body language was calm and collected. His ears were up and forward, his body relaxed and moving gracefully, and he looked like he was just a gentleman out for a Sunday afternoon stroll. When he was about twenty feet away, he stopped, looked at Honey and her mother, then dropped his head and began to sniff the grass. He moved a few feet, sniffed again, and began to nibble.

Honey’s mother looked at Harry grazing and copied him, dropping her head and beginning to nibble at the grass too. Honey stayed close by her side.

Then Mesa was on the move again, walking in ragged, agitated circles at the top of the hill. The circles grew larger and larger, and pretty soon she broke her pattern and came down

again, circling in from the left and heading toward Honey. Her ears went flat against her skull, and her front legs pounded the ground as she walked.

What is wrong with her? Why does she want to hurt Honey? It didn't make any sense. Honey was no threat. Neither was her mother. The truth is, Mesa was just a bully, and she wanted to be the boss. Usually her aggressive behavior worked and she got what she wanted, when she wanted. But this time was different.

When Mesa approached, Harry stopped eating. He lifted his head and turned to watch Mesa. When she was about forty feet away, he turned his whole body to face her and grew very still, mama and foal behind watching nervously. Mesa veered to the left, still walking. Harry moved again to face her. Mesa stopped, looking at Harry. He regarded her calmly. She started walking again and veered to the right. So did Harry. Then Mesa stopped, looked at Harry, and dropped her head, nibbling at the grass. Harry watched her for a minute, then did the same. Harry stayed put, with Mesa in front and Honey and her mother behind him.

Mesa's body language changed when she realized Harry wasn't going to back down. I couldn't believe it as her ears went back up, her body relaxed, and she turned around and grazed her way back up the hill. I watched, relieved, and knew that dear, sweet Harry had thwarted Mesa's bloodlust and saved Honey's life. My dad quickly went into the pasture, gathered up Honey and her mom, and led the pair out and back to their stall. Harry watched, and when the gate shut behind mom and baby, he wandered back up the hill and rejoined the herd.

A few days later, Dad let Honey and her mother out in the pasture, and once again Harry put himself in front of Honey and her mom and stayed there, like a bodyguard. Mesa approached

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aggressively, but Harry stood his ground, and she soon gave up. For the next few months, that's how it went. Mama and baby relaxed, enjoying the sweet grass, while Harry guarded them and kept the peace.

After watching what Harry did that first day, the very next day I decided to confront my own pasture bully. When the mean boy ran out from behind the fence after school, I looked him in the eye and said calmly, quietly, "You *stop* it. Leave me alone. If you kick me ever again, I'm going to tell your mom!"

And you know what? He never did kick me again. I don't think it was the threat to tell his mother that worked. Instead, it was the power of standing my ground. Harry taught me that sometimes you just have to face the bully head-on. And when you do, he might just turn tail and walk away.

Police on Horseback

You've most likely heard of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. But cities all over the world have divisions of police on horses. There are proven reasons for cities to have mounted police. On good days, they are animal ambassadors to the population. And of course they look handsome in celebrations. On tenser days, they work well with crowd control, and the general rule in those situations is that one mounted police officer equals twelve police officers on foot.¹

