

The Smell of Horses

BY RONNIE RICKER, BOZEMAN, MT

I love the smell of horses. It's a musky, wild smell. It does not come from a bottle; you cannot just pin a brand name on it and

thought it was a good move for the family, it still left me crying in my bed for months. Now, looking back, I sometimes wonder why I was so upset over this turn of events. My father was

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put it on anything you choose. For any of you who have grown up around them, and have had a chance to bury your face into the neck of your favorite mare and take a long, deep breath, you know what I'm talking about. It is a unique, wonderful smell, and always when I breathe it in I feel comforted.

I heard once that the sense of smell is related directly to memory. For some people, when they catch a whiff of apple pie they are reminded of their mother, if she was into making such culinary delights. The smell of horses does to me what the smell of apple pie may do to someone else. It always brings the face of one person to mind.

When I was 11, my mother left my father. This is a traumatic experience for a young child, and no matter how much my unhappy mom may have

never exactly an outstanding authority figure. I knew he loved me, but in truth he was more like another child in the house than a father. Because of this, I wasn't particularly close to him, but he was still my father, and it was painful to see him go.

So when my mom moved us to Darby, Montana, along with her new boyfriend, I can't say I was too excited about the situation. His name was Jack, and he was a cowboy to the core. He was an intimidating sight, with his dark complexion, black cowboy hat, boots and a stern looking face.

It didn't help that I was a painfully shy child at that age. I had just entered middle school, and between the move and my mother and father's divorce, I was having a hard time adjusting.

But maybe the loneliness



these changes caused is why I became close to Jack so fast. Within a year, we were closer than I would have thought possible, especially considering my original feelings towards him. I looked at him as my true father figure, and began to strive to be more like him, which was not an easy thing. He was the essence of confidence, and I had no self-esteem. He could do just about anything, from computer programming to painting, and I felt as if I had no talent.

So Jack made it his personal goal to help me find my place in life, the thing that would make me feel like a person whom I could be proud of. He worked with me in art, and I found I wasn't that bad at sketching, and had somewhat of a natural tal-

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ent with pastels. He helped me become less afraid of the world around me, and showed me that I was able to do things on my own.

But the real breakthrough didn't happen until the middle of my eighth-grade year when we moved back to Stevensville, Montana, where we had lived before the divorce.

My mother had bought two horses before her divorce from my father: an old beat-up mare named Dapples and her filly, Mariah. But my mom hadn't been around horses since she was a child, and between all the travelling she did for her job and my father's fear of horses, Mariah had become spoiled to the point where any new person who walked into our field could expect to receive a kick. From my father I had also developed a deep fear of any horse that wasn't miniature, which didn't help the situation either.

As I said before, Jack had many talents. But the thing that he was best at was working with horses. I've seen him take a horse that had her head bashed in by a fence post, a supposedly "crazy" horse, and be riding her around within a month. I call him our personal horse whisperer, and anybody who ever watched him in action would agree that he really is that good with them.

So when we moved back to Stevensville, he began to work with Mariah. Between Jack and my mom, they had her calmed down to where she no longer

thought she was the princess of the house. Just the duchess.

At the same time, Jack began to work with me. We bought an old mare named Dolly. She was a red roan and, though she was really 18, she looked like she was twelve. She was short, had a bit of an ornery streak, and was the horse that Mom and Jack decided to start me on.

Jack would put me on that mare and he'd have me do things I'd never imagined I'd have the courage to do. I was careening over ditches at a full gallop, without a saddle, since my parents thought everybody should learn to ride a horse bareback. I was bucking out the pony my parents had bought for my little brother and sister (and if you are thinking of buying a Shetland, I advise against it). Sometimes I would fall off and hit the dirt with enough force to rattle my teeth, but somehow I always found the courage to get back on.

And the whole time, Jack was standing there, giving encouragement when I needed it and making smart-ass remarks when it looked as if I would give up. He helped me fight through every setback, and after awhile, I could take that mare anywhere.

The whole time Jack was working with me, he was working with Mariah. I still remember the day he first got on her back. I couldn't believe what an amazing job she did. She didn't try to buck, she responded well to all of his commands, and for

once, she didn't look at everybody as if you were the next one going to get a hoof in the back.

That Christmas, my parents gave me a headstall, and a note telling me that a horse came with it. They had given me Mariah. I was terrified. Jack had just started training her under saddle, and she was still very "green." Yet they were giving her to me. I thought of the near miss I'd experienced that day when she had been impatient with me while I was bringing out her grain. She had attempted to take a chunk out of me instead. I cringed thinking about it.

But a part of me was excited, too. This was a way to improve my riding skills, and I actually got to start training my first horse! I have to admit, though, the excitement faded as soon as spring hit, and I actually had to get on her back.

I know that sometimes I frustrated Jack with my fear, but again he helped me work through it. He yelled and gave me hugs and told me I was a great horsewoman. He did what it took to get me through whatever dilemma I was facing that day with Mariah. Sometimes he'd make me cry, but I always finished my ride.

Soon my fear faded, and I realized that I really could do this, and that I wasn't a bad rider at all. In fact, I knew Jack thought I could go a long way in the horse world. And even when he found out I didn't have enough of a competitive streak to take

my horse to a show or race her around barrels, he still gave me the support I needed. Soon my horse, though still quite bad-tempered and mischievous, was a horse I was pretty proud to be around.

At the same time Jack was helping me gain my confidence around horses; he was helping me with confidence in life. I was able to make friends more easily on my own, and I really felt as if I could do whatever I wanted to. When I had a problem, I usually went to him about it. When my very first boyfriend found a different girl, his was the shoulder that I cried on. He had changed my life for the better. As long as he was around, I could always find confidence in myself.

But in the beginning of my sophomore year of high school, Jack started to get sick. He was weak all of the time, and vulnerable to illnesses. Sometimes he'd spend whole weeks in bed. The Jack I had grown to love started to fade. He was never in a good mood, and too sick to go out riding with me.

When my mom finally got him to go to the doctor, we were shocked to learn he had a golf-ball-sized tumor in his neck. They scheduled surgery for him immediately. He went in with a 40% chance of survival. The doctors were shocked when he came through the surgery successfully, and told us it was his strong will to live that had got-

ten him through it. We were all relieved, but a shadow was cast over our happiness when we were told he probably wouldn't live longer than three years.

His health had improved, though he still had his rough



days. I graduated high school, and started my freshman year of college at MSU in the fall of 2003. That year, his health again started to fail, until finally I got a call telling me Jack had had a stroke, and was in the hospital. I skipped a couple of days of classes, and drove home to see him. When I got there, I discovered he had lost sight in his right eye.

Unexpectedly, Jack was in a great mood, or at least when he wasn't yelling at doctors about letting him out of the hospital, he was in a great mood. After a couple of days, he regained sight in his eye, and had received no permanent damage. Again the doctors put a damper on our happiness by telling us he would most likely have more strokes,

and again gave us a time limit. Eight months to a year. It's a terrible feeling, being told that this is "your last Thanksgiving," that I will only be able to buy him one more gag gift for his birthday, and that the number of his hugs and our horseback rides had a limit.

But still, I cling to the hope that the doctors are wrong. That he will fight past the illnesses that always seem to plague his body, and stay with us that much longer.

Though I still have hope, I know one day he will have to let go. I will never give up in life, because I know it isn't what he would do. He would fight to the end. That's what I hope I'll always do.

And I know that every time I breathe in the sweet, musky smell of a horse, I'll remember him, and in doing that remember the strength that I have within me, and that there isn't anything that I can't do. And though I call him Jack, in my mind I always will think of him as Dad.

Editor's note: Ronnie's mom sent us her story, written for an English class a few years ago. Ronnie wrote us in January 2008 that "Jack is still alive (and hopefully will be for awhile)," but had just had another operation for cancer. "I'm in school for Liberal Studies, with a focus in English, Sociology, and possibly Religious Studies. Jack and I remain close, though with school and work I don't see him as much as I'd like. He's one of my biggest supporters."

