

## The Smell of Horses

By Ronnie Ricker



I love the smell of horses. 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 long, deep breath, you know what I'm talking about. It's a musky, wild smell. It does not come from a bottle, you cannot just pin a brand name on it and put it on anything you choose. It is a unique, wonderful smell, and always when I breathe it in it gives me a sense of comfort.

I heard once that your sense of smell is related directly to memory. That when you sometimes catch a whiff of say, apple pie, you will immediately think of your mother, if she was into making such culinary delights. Well, 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 particular person to mind.

When I was 11, my mother left my father. At that age, this is a very dramatic thing, and no matter how unhappy my parents may have been, or how good for the family as a whole it may be, it still left me crying in my bed for the first couple of months. As an adult looking back at this, I sometimes wonder why I was so upset over this turn of events. My father was never exactly an astounding 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 still hurtful to see him go.

So when my mom moved us to Darby, 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, through and through. 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 parents divorce, was having a very hard time adjusting.

But maybe the loneliness these changes had caused is why I became so 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. Not an easy thing, let me tell you. He was the essence of confidence, 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 who was worth something. He worked with me in art, and I found I wasn't that bad at sketching, and had somewhat of a natural talent 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 we moved back to Stevensville, where I had lived before the divorce, in the middle of my eighth grade year.

My mother had bought two horses before my parents divorced. 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 traveling she did for her job, and my father's fear of horses, Mariah became spoiled. Spoiled to the point where any new person who walked into our field could expect to receive a kick. And from my father, I had also developed a deep fear of any horse that wasn't miniature.

As I said before, Jack has many talents. But the thing that he is best at is 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 he really is that good.

So when we moved back to Stevensville, he began to work with Mariah. Between him 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, he began to work with me. We bought an old mare named Dolly. She was a red roan, and though she was eighteen, you could have looked at her and guessed twelve. She was short, and had a bit of an ornery streak. This is the horse my parents 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 full gallop with no 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 (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 set back, 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. I couldn't believe what an amazing job she did. She didn't try to buck, she responded well to all his commands, and for once, she didn't look at everybody as if you were next one to get a hoof in the back.

That Christmas, my parents gave me a headstall, and a note telling me that I got a horse with it. They had given me Mariah. I was terrified. We had just started training her to 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, and had attempted to take a chunk out of *me* instead, and cringed.

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.

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 whatever 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.

And 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. And soon my horse, though still quite bad-tempered mischievous, was a horse I was pretty proud to ride around.

At the same time that Jack was helping me with my confidence in horses, he was helping me with my confidence in life. I was able to make friends easier 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, Jack started to get sick. He was weak all of the time, and vulnerable to illness. Sometimes he'd spend whole weeks in bed. The Jack that I had grown to love started to fade. He was never in a good mood, and too sick to go out riding with me.

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

But 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 days of class, and drove home to see him. When I got there, I discovered he had lost sight in his right eye.

But, 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 year is your last thanksgiving, that I will only be able to buy him one more gag gift for his birthday, 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, and 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 have done. He would have fought 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 mind I always will think of him as dad.