

# Second Chance HORSES

True Stories of the Horses We Rescue  
and the Horses Who Rescue Us



CALLIE SMITH GRANT

Books by Callie Smith Grant

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*Second-Chance Horses*

# Second-Chance HORSES

True Stories of the Horses We Rescue  
and the Horses Who Rescue Us

CALLIE SMITH GRANT, ED.



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*To the memory of “Pooh,” my horse-crazy sister  
who would have loved these stories.*

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## A Word to the Reader

My new friend told me that she'd just moved her livestock to a ranch belonging to my brother-in-law. And by livestock, she meant twenty-one miniature donkeys. When I asked her why she had twenty-one miniature donkeys, she looked at me like I was not very bright and said, "Because they're cute."

Fair enough.

"Come see them," she said. "Bring ginger snaps."

The next time I thought about them was during COVID-19 lockdown in 2020. Since we weren't socializing with people face-to-face, I suggested to my husband that we take a drive to the ranch about twenty miles away to find the miniature donkeys—a nice outdoor experience. He was game. I remembered the ginger snaps, so we stopped at a corner store, bought a bag, and off we went.

My brother-in-law had a lot of ranchland on several roads, but try as we might, we could not find those twenty-one little beasts. We never got to feed them ginger snaps. But we humans discovered we like ginger snaps; we ate the whole bag.

You'll meet that friend in this book and learn how she got involved with donkeys in the first place.

There are plenty of horses in these pages, from Arabian stallions to miniature horses to draft horses to Shetland ponies to wild mustangs and everything in between. You'll even meet a zebra.

Yes, a zebra. I've kept my eyes open for a zebra story for years—and this book has it, written by a California equine rescuer who winds up with a beautiful baby zebra. (Did you know that a herd of zebras is called a “dazzle”?)

You'll meet marvelous personalities in the equine world. A new horse on the ranch whose mission seems to be to comfort his human. A donkey who finds his purpose protecting lambs. A pony who somehow figures out how to drive a golf cart. Blind horses who teach their human about courage. An old, lonely horse who falls head over heels in love with a pretty new mare. A horse who helps a little girl get over her fear of riding. And so many more. You'll even meet Elvis in one story!

You'll be introduced to many rescuers, some running rescue ranches and some who fell into rescue by circumstance. You'll meet one young woman who went from waiting tables to rescuing dozens of horses at a time and who continues making a difference in the world of rescue. You'll meet animals who are emotionally rescued by one of their own species. And of course, you'll meet humans who are rescued emotionally by their horse or donkey. So many times, there are surprise relationships. As contributor Barbara Ellin Fox puts it, “It's a big responsibility when a horse chooses a person as his own.”

The theme is “second chance,” and some examples are right out there. Some are more nuanced. The fact is, there are so many second chances in these stories, I had to limit the number of times we used the words! You'll read a few amazing second chances one could consider miraculous. Whenever I read about that sort of thing, I feel especially privileged.

I know some of you readers are horsemen and horsewomen. Some are ranchers and farmers. Some used to ride as children. But many of you are armchair horse people, not in a position or at a point in life to own and ride. You'll meet people in these pages who found other ways to indulge their love for the equine. You may find yourself thinking about creative ways to be with a horse you always wanted. I'm thinking about that myself after reading these stories.

On my desk as I write this, I have a tiny red ceramic cowboy boot. Or in this case, a cowgirl boot, because it belonged to my horse-crazy sister. We were three years apart in age, and while I loved our horses growing up, she completely adored them. Each night after supper when the weather was warm enough, she took her homework to the barn and sat in the hay with her favorite horse and our occasional ponies. They even whinnied outside her bedroom window in the mornings to wake her up.

My sister passed away a few years ago, and while I was at her house shortly afterward, I saw the little red ceramic boot. I picked it up and pocketed it. I keep it as a symbol of the inspiring childhood we had involving animals. She is one of the reasons I started writing about them.

I wish my sister were here to read these stories. I often wanted to call her and talk to her about what I was reading. She loved everything I wrote, as a good big sister would, but she especially loved these collections of stories by others.

So I offer *Second-Chance Horses* to you in her memory. Enjoy the ride!



# Pumpkin Patch

*Andi Lehman*

When we fulfilled our daughter’s dream of a pony for her eleventh birthday, my husband and I assumed we were “one and done.” But, as all horse owners learn, it’s hard to have a single equine. Within weeks of our mare’s arrival, we received offers for various pals to keep her company. A couple of candidates came and went. And then, we met Pumpkin.

A miniature orange and white paint with a history of hoof disease called founder, Pumpkin needed a new home. He was a fat four-year-old gelding—the equivalent of an overweight preschooler with a chronic eating issue. His busy owner offered him to us for free if we would address the founder and give him the attention she could not.

We drove across the county on a bright winter day to see him, and he was oh-so-cute. His thick, two-colored tail swept the ground as he quickstepped along the fence line, regarding us with one big blue eye and one brown. We laughed at his high-pitched whinny, more of a shrill squeal than a neigh.

A half-horse, as our daughter dubbed him, Pumpkin seemed docile enough, and he was certainly short if not svelte. Her pony would enjoy the companionship, and we would give Pumpkin a good life. How much trouble could a plump mini horse be?

We soon found out. He may have stood only forty inches high, but his diminutive frame housed the heart of a Percheron stallion. While he gave due deference to the lead mare in their herd of two, he set out to be the ruling monarch of us all.

Not that my besotted husband minded. Just looking at Pumpkin transported my spouse back to summer visits on his aunt's farm in Maryland where she raised Chincoteague ponies. He phoned his parents, asking them to send a small saddle.

And he gave Pumpkin a nickname: "The Prince of the Meadow." Each morning before work, he walked to the barn with a carrot to say hello. He roughed up Pumpkin's mane, rubbed his withers, and leaned over to whisper "You're the Prince" in his ear. (I always thought the name "Loki," after the wily Norse god of mayhem, would be more appropriate. In public, I referred to Pumpkin as our yard art—attractive but useless.)

I realized early on that Pumpkin believed minis were not meant for riding. Or showing. Or even leading. Minis exist to do whatever they want and to make people smile, nothing more. They eat, sleep, and play—not necessarily with us.

Our first attempt to saddle Pumpkin also became our last. We thought he would enjoy giving a ride to our seven-year-old son, who weighed less than a meager fifty pounds. It was a toss-up as to who was less enthused, mini-man or mini-mount.

Pumpkin hopped and bucked and tried to shake the saddle off his back, so we should not have been surprised when he did the same with our son. The boy lasted all of five seconds atop the tiny steed, and we never got him on a horse again. To this day, he enjoys them from a distance.

Pumpkin's favorite pastime (other than eating) was scratching his itches on our hog-wire fence. The six-inch-square wire openings functioned as a multi-broad-handed masseuse. Pumpkin scraped his head and neck or his shoulders and flanks against the taut wires, but he especially relished wagging his wide rump back and forth across them like a fat windshield wiper.

In the spring, the wire holes also acted as defoliators for his thick winter coat. Pumpkin spread his shedding self all along our

fence line, much to the delight of the birds who lined their nests with his soft fur and long strands from his tail. While I fretted over the unsightly orange and white explosions of horsehair that hugged our property, my daughter and husband just chuckled and called each gift a “Pumpkin patch.”

The scamp’s innate curiosity and overconfidence got him into repeated trouble. One balmy afternoon while we focused our attention on fence post repairs, Pumpkin ambled over to the electric golf cart we used for hauling our supplies. A bit of snooping led to stepping—right up onto the floor of the vehicle where he somehow hit the gas pedal with his front feet.

We looked up in time to see our fearless mini gazing over the wheel of the golf cart and driving straight toward a section of fence. Helpless, we watched him slam into the wire and squirt out the side of the cart on impact. He took a quick look around, shook himself off, and returned to grazing—clearly hoping there were no witnesses.

Whenever a gate was left open (or was opened by the imp of mischief), our pair of prancers skipped out of their four-acre haven and roamed down the cove, visiting one green lawn after another. That first summer, the visits were so frequent that our neighbors set up a phone relay. We exchanged numbers, and helpful spotters called around to indicate the direction the horses were heading. By the fall, we knew every homeowner in our subdivision.

On his way down our lane, Pumpkin liked to stop at my bird feeders for a quick snack of seeds and fruit. Our first indicator of an equine breakout often came from a glance out the kitchen window. Broken feeders hanging at odd angles or strewn across the lawn usually meant a horse hunt unless we could catch him in the act before he bolted.

When he wasn’t marauding, Pumpkin enjoyed the sunflowers I planted on the west side of the barn in the dry lot—he ate them down to nubs. He also snatched big mouthfuls of my mums any time he was led past them from the barn to the round corral. His position of choice seemed to be head-down with jaws working.

We quickly realized we would need to invest in the same kind of training for The Prince that we were giving our pony: expensive and time-consuming but successful. Without it, we'd own a well-behaved adult and an ill-mannered juvenile delinquent. Our talented daughter put her natural horsemanship education to work on her second student.

First, she introduced some basic social skills like respecting her space and yielding to pressure. As soon as Pumpkin could follow her lead consistently, she treated him like a big herding dog and gave him jobs. Once he realized a horse treat might be the payoff for his chores, he followed her around like a puppy.

She filled a burlap feed sack with empty cans and taught her mouthy mini to fetch. Soon he retrieved anything we threw out in the dry lot: the sack of cans, a ball cap, a glove. He even learned to bring in the hard rubber feed bins after each feeding. After carrying them one at a time between his teeth, he released the prize to one of her hands—so long as he spied his treat in the other.

In addition, Pumpkin learned to put his front feet on a pedestal (benefitting, no doubt, from his experience with the golf cart) and to hop atop the wooden plinth on all fours and pose for a photo. Using a twenty-two-foot lead rope, his savvy trainer convinced him to jump the logs we scattered in the meadow, even though he preferred to walk along the tops of them like a sure-footed billy goat on a balance beam.

Unfortunately, we were less successful at getting him to give up grass. While our pony came running at her owner's first whistle, Pumpkin acted like he didn't even hear her. He pushed his face deeper into the green carpet and grazed away at the sweet, sugary blades. Our grass hound's founder problems went from bad to worse. We tried one farrier and then another. We learned there are multiple schools of thought to treating founder, and we dabbled in all of them. Finally, our favorite farrier told us we would never solve the hoof problem until we addressed the food problem by banning The Prince from the meadow.

We set up a lightweight electric wire enclosure inside our big dry lot. But the grass sirens still called to Pumpkin. As winter

brought cold temperatures and a thick protective coat to our mini, he simply ducked underneath the wire and accepted the brief sizzle on his back and neck as the price to enter the pasture.

We added a second lower strand to keep him from scooting underneath the first. Clever Pumpkin started testing the fence to see if it was on. Approaching the two strands with due respect, he listened for the faint humming noise from the current. If he didn't hear it, he stretched out his neck to touch the wire with his nose. No shock, no fence. He plowed it down without apology.

Despite our diligent attempts to keep him on a strict diet and off the grass, we didn't see immediate results. So we congratulated ourselves when Pumpkin started to slim down—until he kept losing weight, a lot of it. His movements became uncoordinated, and he had no strength in his hind legs. He walked with an odd wobble, if he walked at all, and he held his neck bowed inward and his feet splayed outward trying to maintain his equilibrium.

Our vet said nothing while he examined Pumpkin. The symptoms pointed to EPM, equine protozoal myeloencephalitis, a degenerative neurological disease spread by the saliva or feces of wild opossums. The prognosis wasn't good, and at this stage of the illness, the doctor gave Pumpkin a 50/50 chance of survival. He left us a special powder and a paste to administer faithfully, which our daughter did for weeks. Her dad visited the patient daily to offer a rub of encouragement or a carrot, which Pumpkin refused—a sure sign of his distress. We missed the sound of his quick-trotting steps and his wee whinnies. We worried and prayed.

But time and attention and the wise council of our vet and farrier won out. And some unexpected benefits came from the ordeal. After Pumpkin was forced to rest and eat only what he was fed, his hooves grew back to nearly normal as he got stronger. And he never regained all his previous weight, which left him healthier than he had been prior to his sickness.

Post EPM, the close bond between my husband and my daughter deepened as they shared their joy in The Prince's recovery. They took impromptu pictures of our brave survivor and texted them to each other. The horse's name appeared painted on a large board



above his stall. Orange pumpkin cutouts decorated the walls, high enough to be unreachable by small inquisitive teeth.

My doting spouse gave our firstborn a six-inch Schleich model horse that looked just like Pumpkin, and the figure started popping up in all kinds of places inside our house as they took turns hiding and finding the toy. Soon my son and I joined the game we called “Where’s Pumpkin?” Whoever found him hid him next. That Christmas our daughter made her dad a hardback book of the same name filled with photos of all the locations “little Pumpkin” had visited during the year.

Not to be outdone, the real Pumpkin also invaded our house. His resident trainer decided to see if she could get him to approach and enter through the back door. Standing to one side of him, she raised the lead rope toward the open doorway and exerted slight pressure forward. He ambled across the threshold, walked through the foyer into the kitchen, and looked around with interest as if he might join us for breakfast. We gave him some treats and took a snapshot for our fridge, where his royal visage could greet us every morning.

While one of our children was building her life around horses, the other built his in the theater. And before long, the two intersected. When the local high school teacher who cast our son as Will Parker in *Oklahoma* needed a barnyard scene in her lobby, she asked our family to create an interactive display with animals. We built a life-size barn wall next to the ticket booth and got permission to fence in a square section of tiled floor and fill it with hay—and Pumpkin.

Rabbits, chickens, and a rooster peered at him from their cages along one side of the pen. Our cheerful mini rested his chin on the wooden rails and accepted as his right the pats of hundreds of patrons throughout five public performances. At the end of the theater season, we brought home three coveted regional awards, including one for Best Lobby Design.

Years later, Pumpkin made another house call during the first summer we faced the monster COVID. My favorite clients at the First Regional Library system asked me to give educational presentations with my animal partners in a live Zoom format since we couldn’t meet as we usually did on-site at the individual branches.

The summer library reading theme was Fables and Fairy Tales, and I titled my opening Zoom program “Princes, Princesses, and Ponies.” I asked my daughter for footage of her horses, who had multiplied again and now numbered four. She created a magical PowerPoint for me highlighting their unique traits and explaining to viewers why each one reminded her of a different Walt Disney steed.

She showed several engaging videos of her equine friends, and we crowned the hour-long program with our live surprise guest, Pumpkin. He sailed through the familiar back door, stepped onto the blankets we spread along his path “just in case,” clopped through the kitchen, the den, and down a hall past three bedrooms to enter my office. Once he arrived, he blew out a whuffle of air and waited, gently swishing his magnificent tail and stretching his nose toward the camera. We tossed a ball cap on the carpet, and he did his best retriever imitation a few times (for a horse treat, of course). He stayed and visited for about ten minutes before returning the way he came—no fuss, no attitude, no accidents. First a thespian and now a movie actor, The Prince proved what he already knew—he was the star, the reigning monarch.

Today, at twenty-two, Pumpkin still rules the barnyard. Our daughter likes to say she owns three and a half horses. But what a half! He rears up on stout little legs to nip the necks of both my daughter’s big geldings and delights in dodging around their legs, trying to agitate them into play.

He also resides in a stall with the old blind mare who first welcomed him to her meadow. He serves her now as a stalwart partner, sharing her hay manger, giving her grace when she bumps into him, and protecting her from the horse in the stall next to them by administering a swift bite if the usurper threatens his pony pal.

For a little horse who has never been shown, never competed in a horse event, and never been ridden (for long), Pumpkin has added colorful and unexpected threads to the patchwork quilt of our family story. Sometimes a rescued animal fills our lives in places we didn’t even know were empty.

Pumpkin did.



## Once-in-a-Lifetime Horse

*DeVonna R. Allison*

As soon as I saw Geronimo prancing inside a round pen, I knew he was special. A deep red-over-white paint quarter horse, he was flashy, yes, but there was something else about him. Geronimo had “presence.”

Though past his prime and retired from the rodeo circuit, Geronimo still moved like an athlete. His head held high, his intelligent eyes watched the barnyard, noticing everything. His nostrils drank in every scent. He continued to prance around his enclosure as I crossed the gravel drive and my breath caught in my throat. This horse was breathtaking.

Geronimo wasn't my first horse. Horses are expensive pets; it's worth it to take time before buying one. Besides the costs of feeding a 1,200-pound animal, horses require regular farrier visits to maintain their feet and hooves. Naturally there will also be occasional vet bills, monthly worming, annual shots, and disease testing. Buying Geronimo was a decision I did not take lightly.

The rancher handling the sale stepped into the round pen and caught Geronimo easily and held him for me. The horse's hooves were neatly trimmed and his feet sound. He had a friendly, approachable demeanor, and his teeth were appropriate for his age.

He was not head-shy. He backed willingly and responded readily to whatever was asked of him. He was saddled, and my son mounted, steering him toward a sand exercise ring just beyond the stable.

“Be careful to avoid the barrels,” the rancher cautioned, pointing at the opposite end of the ring; Geronimo was a trained barrel racer. The horse went smoothly through his paces, and when my son reined up at the side of the ring, I ran my hand down Geronimo’s warm, satiny side.

“I’ll take him,” I said.

Shaking hands, the rancher and I agreed upon a price and day of delivery. That magnificent horse was mine! As we walked back to our truck, my heart sang. *Thank you, Lord! He’s just what I was looking for!*

I had no idea he would be so much more.

Four years earlier, our family had embarked on a new adventure when we bought our dream home on five acres. We received the keys on the first day of June and prepared for the move. The house and land had been neglected for several years, so there was a lot to do. Rolling up our sleeves, we dove into the work as a family. It was truly a labor of love.

On the 25th of June that year, our oldest son, Wesley, was invited to a sleepover by his best friend. Wes was fourteen and a huge help—as were his three younger siblings—with all the work on the new property. That week, Wes and my husband, Earl, had ripped out all the old carpeting; it was a dusty, stinky, sweaty job. Wes deserved some fun.

I kissed Wes goodbye at 3:30 in the afternoon. At a little after 6:00 that same evening, we got the call that rocked our world. Wesley had drowned.

The next month and a half are a blur in my memory. The funeral was large, standing-room only, and people were kind. But their lives quickly went back to normal afterward. Ours did not.

We finally got moved into the new house in the middle of August. We settled in, ordered new carpeting, painted, and tried to figure out how to be a family of five when once we’d been six. We limped along, leaning heavily on our faith and one another.

Some days were better than others, but gradually our lives took on a new rhythm.

Dealing with their own grief, our three surviving children were soon caught up in school, sports, friends, and 4-H. Earl returned to his job and found some solace in his work. A stay-at-home mom, I took a small part-time job, continued to care for my family, and struggled with the yawning inner void left by my son's death.

The week before I first saw Geronimo, I joined Earl outside our barn. Dusk settled in, filled with typical country-night sounds. Frogs, cicadas, and crickets sang their summer evening melodies, and our roosting chickens purred and chuckled in the henhouse. I swatted the occasional mosquito, watching Earl load his truck with tools and equipment for the following day's work.

"I wish I could just find something to help, you know?" I said. "Nothing seems to take my mind off this terrible . . ." I stopped. The words caught in my throat, and tears welled up. Earl paused and came to me in the gathering darkness. We held each other.

"I know," he said. "I know."

Our moment was interrupted by the phone ringing in the house. I ran to answer it, wiping my eyes as I went. It was our neighbor, Linda, from a half a mile down the road.

"Hey, DeVonna," Linda greeted me. "I know it's been a while since you mentioned it, but are you still looking for a horse? I have a friend who can't afford to keep hers any longer. She asked me if I knew of anyone who might be interested in him, and you're the first person I thought of." I'd almost forgotten that conversation. It must have been over six months ago.

"Sure." I shrugged. "I'll take a drive over and look at him. What's the address?"

Of course, I fell in love with the horse.

The day of Geronimo's arrival dawned with clear blue skies. A warm Midwestern sun shone brightly over the deep green corn and soybean fields of high summer. Songbirds flitted back and forth to the feeder outside our picture window, and my flower beds spilled over with blooms. All of this was lost on me as I waited for

Geronimo to be delivered. I was a wreck of nervous anticipation, pacing and peering through the windows toward the drive.

Earl was at work, and the kids were busy with their own pursuits, so I waited alone, fighting the urge to call the rancher. *He is a very busy man, I reminded myself, plus he's doing me a big favor by delivering the horse. I will not bug that poor man just because I can't control myself!*

I tried to do some laundry. I say "tried" because after the machine stopped, I realized I hadn't added any detergent. Sighing, I reset the machine and washed the load again, this time with soap. I continued to watch the clock.

Morning faded into early afternoon, and I was considering walking down the drive to check the mail, when . . . hark! Our two dogs shot up from where they lounged on the floor. They stared out the window in silence for a moment, then broke out in excited barking.

A long, gleaming horse trailer appeared at the curve in our driveway. It was quite a rig. Outfits like that could carry up to four stalled horses at a time and had an inside tack room plus sleeping quarters for its riders. It was the Cadillac of horse trailers. The fact that it was pulled by a faded and dusty, work-wearied diesel pickup may have struck me as funny any other time. Today I was focused on only one thing. My horse was in there; Geronimo had arrived.

I raced outside where our pony, Poker, whirled and bucked around his pen. Excited by the arrival of this strange vehicle, Poker abruptly slid to a stop. Mane and forelock tossing wildly, he lifted his head, wild-eyed, and sniffed. He'd caught Geronimo's scent. Snorting, the pony stamped both front feet and issued a high and raspy challenging whinny.

*Who are you? Poker demanded. And what are you doing here on my turf?*

From deep inside the gleaming trailer, Geronimo's voice answered, loud, low, and regal. Poker was entranced. He and Geronimo continued to call back and forth to one another, softer now, "talking" together in friendly tones.

I realized I was holding my breath. Exhaling deeply, I waited for the rancher to exit his truck. We greeted one another, and I watched as he lowered the trailer's ramp, swung wide its doors, and then made his way deep inside. I could hear his voice, indistinctly, speaking to Geronimo, the metallic clang of a latch and a chain rattling. Poker and I stood, both of us quivering in anticipation, waiting for them to emerge.

I was afraid I'd exaggerated Geronimo in my memory. I'd only seen him once, and that was a week ago. But the second I saw him that day, I was again taken by his beauty and grace. Stepping daintily down the ramp, he unloaded like a dream. The rancher led him to me, snapped my lead to Geronimo's halter, and handed me the rope. He was officially mine!

Geronimo and I stood together in the leafy shade of our oak tree after the rancher left. The sound of cicadas buzzing hung in the air and mingled with the drifting dust cloud where the truck had passed. Bored again, the dogs returned to the porch, where they lazed beneath my hanging ferns. Geronimo looked around the shady green lawn, taking in the sight of the horse pen, chicken house, barn, and deep north woods. Having seen enough, he dropped his head and began to crop grass, ripping mouthfuls from the lawn.

I couldn't contain my emotions any longer. Throwing my arms around his neck, I leaned against his broad shoulder and wept tears of grief mixed with indescribable joy. I cried harder than I'd allowed myself in a while. Geronimo stood calm and raised his head. I was afraid my outburst would startle him, but he continued chewing a mouthful of grass. His ears flickered back toward the sound of my sobs; his breathing was relaxed and regular. From all appearances, comforting damsels in distress was just part of his job.

The rhythm of my days changed after Geronimo arrived. I climbed out of bed willingly each morning and rushed through my breakfast, eager to be greeted by Geronimo's soft chuckle. I relished caring for him, brushing him, feeding him, leading him to and from the pasture. I discovered his favorite scratching place was just behind his left front elbow. While I scratched, he stood

still, closed his eyes, and sighed. I bought him a fancy show halter, which was ridiculously expensive, and a good secondhand Western saddle. I spoiled him with peppermint treats, apple slices, and carrots. I spent hours soaping and polishing his saddle and bridle, my fingers turning wrinkled.

Earl and our son built Geronimo a pen separate from the pony. (Geronimo was greedy with the grain.) The favorite part of my days became the afternoons in the lengthening sunlight when I sat with him. Enjoying his horsey scent, I watched him doze, his tail swishing away flies, his ears back, one hind foot cocked in quiet relaxation.

Our best times, though, were when we rode. Whether we rode down our dirt lane, traveled our country road, or explored the woods together, Geronimo was always an eager, trusting, reliable mount. We often rode past neighboring farms. He was not afraid of traffic.

I began to learn Geronimo's likes and dislikes. For instance, while sheep didn't bother him, he did not like hogs. Near a hog pen he would stop, ears up, feet planted wide, sniffing the scary squealing pigs. I was careful to avoid farms with pigpens near the road.

The huge combines farmers drove through the fields harvesting grain made him nervous. Their large diesel engines roared and put out thick black smoke. The combines rattled and groaned and clanked as they bounced down the asphalt. If we saw one parked quietly in a field, I would stop and let Geronimo sniff and stare for a minute until he relaxed and we continued on our way.

I learned he was not afraid of dogs. On our first ride, a neighbor's slavering, baying Great Dane bounded up to us. I gathered the reins, preparing myself for Geronimo to kick or rear or buck or run. He did none of these. He glanced at the dog without breaking stride and then ignored it, continuing our ride. I wanted to hug him, then and there.

The inexpressible solace of a companionable ride cannot be overstated. One such ride stands out in my memory.

Arriving home from a demoralizing day at work, I pulled up to the mailbox, removed some mail I didn't want to see, and shivered.



The autumn day was damp and chilly with low-hanging, rain-heavy clouds. The gloomy skies matched my mood. I was glad to be home.

Up at the house I checked on the horses. Geronimo greeted me at the gate, ears forward, head up, nickering low and soft, expectantly. I smiled in spite of myself.

“What are you begging for, you big, spoiled boy?” I teased while caressing his velvet nose and lips. He responded by raising a front hoof and tapping the wooden gate sharply. This was his way of asking for a ride. I felt inspired; why not?

I tossed the mail unopened on the desk and headed to the bedroom to change. By the time I reached the bedroom doorway, I was peeling off my office clothes and pulling on my jeans, a long-sleeved tee, and one of Earl’s soft flannel shirts. I grabbed my leather boots and a jacket by the back door and headed to the barn. The barn never fails to console me. Its sweet smell of grains and hay mixed with the scents of animal sweat, saddle soap, and leather is an intoxicant that both relaxes and invigorates me.

As Geronimo paced around his pen, his anticipation mirrored my own. I led him out of his pen while he kept his gaze on the path to the open fields. I brushed him and cleaned his feet before smoothing on the saddle blanket and pad. I slung the heavy saddle up and settled it onto his back. Cinching the belly strap, I felt my excitement rise. *I deserve this ride*, I thought. *We both do*.

Mounting, I felt the knots of anxiety in my body ease as I settled comfortably into the saddle and reined Geronimo toward the field. He stepped out briskly, and I took in the sights, sounds, and smells of the woods we passed. The ferns were gone, having turned golden brown after the first frost, and many of the songbirds had migrated, leaving the squirrels to gather and hoard their stores of nuts, alone. Leaves had changed and fallen, destined to become mounds of mulch beneath the trees. The woods looked devoid of life, leafless and birdless, but they also emitted a vibrant and pleasing scent of rich, damp earth and foliage decay.

When I reached the end of the driveway, I could see what had caught Geronimo’s eye. A flock of wild Canada geese was gleaning

the freshly harvested field. These flocks are such a common sight in our area I'd barely noticed them earlier. I wondered how the geese would react to sharing their field with us. I expected them to scatter and fly away. I was surprised to see them move calmly aside as we passed among them.

Geronimo's attention shifted from the geese to the far edge of the field. I urged him into a trot. In his excitement he moved to canter; Geronimo was eager to run. I knew if I let him dictate our pace, he'd be hard to control, so I brought him back down into a warm-up trot. Geronimo telegraphed his frustration by swinging his head wildly up and down and prancing. I couldn't help but grin at his antics. Snorting and arching his neck, he drew in the sweet, damp smell of the field beneath the low, gray skies.

"Settle down," I soothed him. Leaning forward, I patted his neck. "That's a good boy." His ears swiveled back, listening. He walked smartly on.

Reaching the far end of the field, I clicked my tongue several times, and Geronimo eased into his lovely rocking canter. The cool air, the damp field, the wide, open space—I felt my spirit lift, cleansed. The geese again parted like Moses's sea when we reached them, allowing us to pass among them. We turned. I tested the saddle and leaned forward while squeezing my legs and raising the reins.

"Get up, Geron! Get up!" I urged. He needed no further encouragement.

Swept by the wind of our speed, Geronimo's mane whipped at my face as we flew across the ground, hooves thudding. Together we leaned forward, taking joy in Geronimo's love of movement, his raw power, and our synergy. Rippling laughter of pure joy erupted from my lips, and the geese, hearing the sound, stood tall and broke into a wild symphony of honking.

That night when my family got home, Earl asked about my day. All the terrible parts forgotten, I smiled and said, "I rode through a field of wild geese."

Horsemen will tell you that there is a phenomenon known as the once-in-a-lifetime horse. Such an animal comes around very rarely

and occurs when a rider encounters a horse with whom they share a connection so special it seems that horse and rider can almost read each other's minds. Together, horse and rider form a unique bond and understanding that is hard to explain.

Geronimo was my once-in-a-lifetime horse. He came to me at a desperate time in my life, and by being simply who he was, sweet, wise, intelligent, trusting, he comforted me. I believe God used Geronimo to lift me up and out of my darkest time and to allow me to experience again the joys of life and living.