

Notes of a Horsey Daughter:

MY EXPERIENCE WITH HIPPOPHILE-HYSTERIA, OR "HORSE CRAZY GIRL SYNDROME"

BY ALLISON SCHULTZ

I have a confession to make: I have been horse-crazed for well over half of my 25 years. I can barely remember how it all started, really. Most of the time I think I bothered my dad about getting me a horse just to see if he would actually do it. But I don't think I can confess to being that conniving so young in my life. I had a fixation with unicorns and Pegasus as a young girl and had a herd of them in my stuffed animal entourage in bed with me at night.

My mother tells me that my plea for a horse began in the second grade when I went on a trail ride in New Mexico. I can recollect fragments of that first trail ride adventure: the horses, the afternoon sun, the dust, the smell of horses, the knotted reins, the old saddle, an unkempt mane in front of me and the view of the landscape from between my horse's ears. I remember that while everyone else on the ride complained of being saddle sore the next day, I was proud that I wasn't, and because of this I thought myself to be a natural horsewoman.

It was all downhill from there. The phrase "Dad, can I have a horse?!" was the most repeated set of words my father would hear for the next few years. My parents told me they thought it was a phase I was going through, and they were convinced it would pass. When they saw me trying to saddle and ride my younger sister, they began to take me more seriously. Once I realized that my sister was too small and fragile for me to sit on, I started tying her to the wagon like a carriage horse and would make her gallop around the hilly yard with me in the wagon in tow. I knew she didn't have as much endurance as a real horse would, and neither did the saw horses in the garage.

My mind was reeling constantly astride the fantasy of horses. As an avid reader, my parents would often take me to the book store in the local shopping plaza each week. In no time I had burned through every book in

the Saddle Club Series and The Black Stallion series. I had always held the image in my head of being able to tame my own wild horse like the Black. And those images in my imagination were so red-hot and vivid, that I probably had a fixation disorder. I longed so deeply for a horse of my own, that I latched on to everything horse: horse books, horse movies, Breyer horse models, catalogs, posters, and calendars. I was just short of turning into a horse myself.

My dad worked in the heavy equipment business, in the management and sales end, and had come to know many folks in west-central Wisconsin – many folks that not only had a need for tractors and earth movers, but also had horses. On the weekends he would take me to their barns and pastures so I could get my fix of real horses. But I was never satiated, and those visits were just teasers. I would touch the horse's soft muzzles and all those vivid images in my imagination would rear up again. Dad would keep pointing to the mounds of manure to remind me of the great sums of work involved in owning a horse, to no avail.

One time around Christmas he took me to a customer's farm. They had an Appaloosa mare, 4yrs old, not really broke, but FOR SALE. Her name was Maya. Oh, my hopes were so high. At 10 years old, I knew that this was not the horse best suited to me, but she needed a home and I needed a horse. I kept dreaming and scheming that my parents would buy her for Christmas that year and put her in the bathroom in the finished basement until I found her in the morning (I figured mom would like her in the bathroom because the tile floor would be easier to clean than the carpet). I think I got horse stickers that year instead.

Shortly after that drastically unfulfilled Christmas wish, I joined the local 4-H Horseless Horse Program, a program that matches horse-less girls with girls who had horses as a mentorship and a hands-on, crash course in horses.

My horse partner was Erin Kleven, and "my" horse was Tonto, a sorrel Quarter horse mare with a white hind pastern and a stripe down her face that looked like an ostrich. I met with Erin and Tonto as much as possible, helping out with everything horse care related. I showed at the 4-H fair that year and won first place with Tonto in the Horseless Horse 13 and Under Showmanship Class.

That summer of '91 was the summer that I got my very own first horse: a flaxen chestnut Morgan mare named Tulip. Tulip and I had many ill-fated adventures as a beginning duo, and a medical catastrophe rendered her unable to be ridden. By that time, my sister had recovered from being ridden, and had a horse of her own to ride. Soon my parents left their beloved, newly remodeled show home, for a fixer-upper with a beautiful barn on 11 acres with a creek running through it on the county line. We had become horse people.

I ate, slept and breathed horses. The barn was my immaculate sanctuary and I took care of it from feeding to cleaning, and of course, grooming and riding. Mom would take me weekly to lessons an hour away. When I learned how to drive, I learned to drive the truck and trailer. When I began to shave my legs, I used the horse clippers. While our neighbors were on vacations, I was the local barn-sitter. Our family weekend rituals involved packing to horse shows. And in no time, the 5 stall barn was full of horses. We lived out on the county line for 8 years and had 7 horses in that time: Tulip led to Sophie, Norman, Fuzzy, Lily, Carpet, and Sweetpea.

Through my middle and high school years, I felt like I had my identity with horses. Some girls played sports after school, yet, I loathed school days for the time it kept me out of the barn. Although I was always the last person picked for teams in gym class, I had my horses, and that was something I was good at. I never went to High school dances. I defined a hippophile in a haiku poem in English class as "someone who would rather clean stalls than go to prom." I was the only one in my school with horses so I felt as though I was notoriously special, that I couldn't really be known without my horses.

When I graduated high school in 1999, my parents decided to move back into town. At the time I was down to 2 horses which were boarded. I missed the daily barn ritual, but took summer school classes at the University, and visited the horses daily. Once the academic year was in full swing, I met so many new friends who didn't know me with my horse associations, which made me reflect

on my own issues of self-identity-without-horses. Although by that point the horse was too much of an integral part of my functioning system, so when I sold my last horse in 2002, it was as though I was losing a limb.

I sold my last horse, Carpet, while I was studying in Montana. He had been shipped out to hang out with me on the ranch where I was working. I decided to sell him because it was too expensive toting a horse across the country in those years of collegiate learning and unfair to a good horse in his prime to wait for me to finish with school. The woman who bought Carpet lived in Ryegate, MT, through Sweet Grass County, where *The Horse Whisperer* was filmed. I delivered him myself and I remember thinking how I felt like I was in the movie as I drove through the scenery. It was a strange coincidence to leave my last real horse in a setting that spawns most horse fantasies.

Horses have always been part of my landscape. No matter how much I tried to tell myself that I didn't need horses anymore, I found myself sick from the huge void in my life where the horses used to be. I found that I could not go for more than a month without seeing, touching, or thinking of one. Something in my heart ached. I craved them. Once I moved to Boulder, I was away from horses for about 3 months, keeping myself busy with a new setting and a new masters program. I am getting my masters degree in Religious Studies at CU and writing my thesis this year. My thesis is on how the horse and rider, as a dynamic coupling, are a synergetic event in which the horse and rider transcend boundaries of 'horse' and 'rider' and become a 'third, much greater thing'

But all it took was seeing a horse painting on a Pearl Street stroll to ignite that passion again. I needed a job and I knew that I loved horses too much to ignore it. I had sent out resumes and a cover letter to 18 area barns, looking for a chance to stick my foot in the manure pile again and be with the creatures that I loved so much. In my cover letter I wrote:

"This letter comes to you as an inquiry about your need for barn help, from a person who wants to wake up and smell the barn. If you have any need for barn help as spring blooms around the corner, please keep me in mind as a possible addition to your facility as a stall cleaner, groom, exerciser/handler, etc. ...After 6 months in Boulder, I find that I have been itching to be in the

presence of horses again. My most favorite thing in the world is cleaning stalls, grooming/conditioning/handling, and with each, I am invariably meticulous. When it comes to barn tasks, you will find that I am a self-starter and efficient and thorough. Sometimes I wonder why I bother with the rigorous pursuits of graduate education when I could be the happiest turd just cleaning stalls and brushing horses all day!"

By spring semester I had a job on a ranch on Boulder's north county line, and I have been there since doing what I used to do with horses and filling my soul. And now horses have suffused into my academic life. I write papers about this phenomenon, the bond between horse and rider, the media images that fuel our own images and fantasies, the new ethic towards animal "others."

Any horse-crazy girl could tell you a similar tale, and I often consider myself lucky. Most tales of severance from horses may never have a re-connection, some girls only get to dream about a horse of their own, and some women have had the un-fulfilled promises of horses in their youth only to unite with their first horse in mid-life. Horses immerse those who love them deep in piles of labor. Working with horses is hard on the body and the

pocketbook, yet people will impoverish themselves just to own horses. The horse-human bond is a crazy thing.

In my life with horses, there have been as many happy trails as sad ones. The world of animals is wrought with emotion: horses die, babies are born, hard-earned ribbons are won or lost, we get kicked, bucked off, bitten. Every time an animal dies on the ranch in Montana, my friend Phil will tell his mother: "Mom, it's not like you install kitchen cabinets for a living. You work with living things. They die. But you love it, so you pick up and move along." Whether happy or sad, there are always tears with animals. For me, all it takes is watching a horse on the silver screen, or reading horse stories, or looking at pictures of humans and their horses and I am a teary-eyed mess. In my most longing moments, I think back to the memories of when I had my own barn full of horses. I dream about those days now. Those were the moments that I would return to if given a trip back in time. Every horse reminds me of those days. I keep telling myself that if I am going to stick with this horse thing, I should really get over crying. But I think of how the many mystics cried when they experienced God, cried whenever they felt 'that' presence in their hearts, so these tears must mean something.