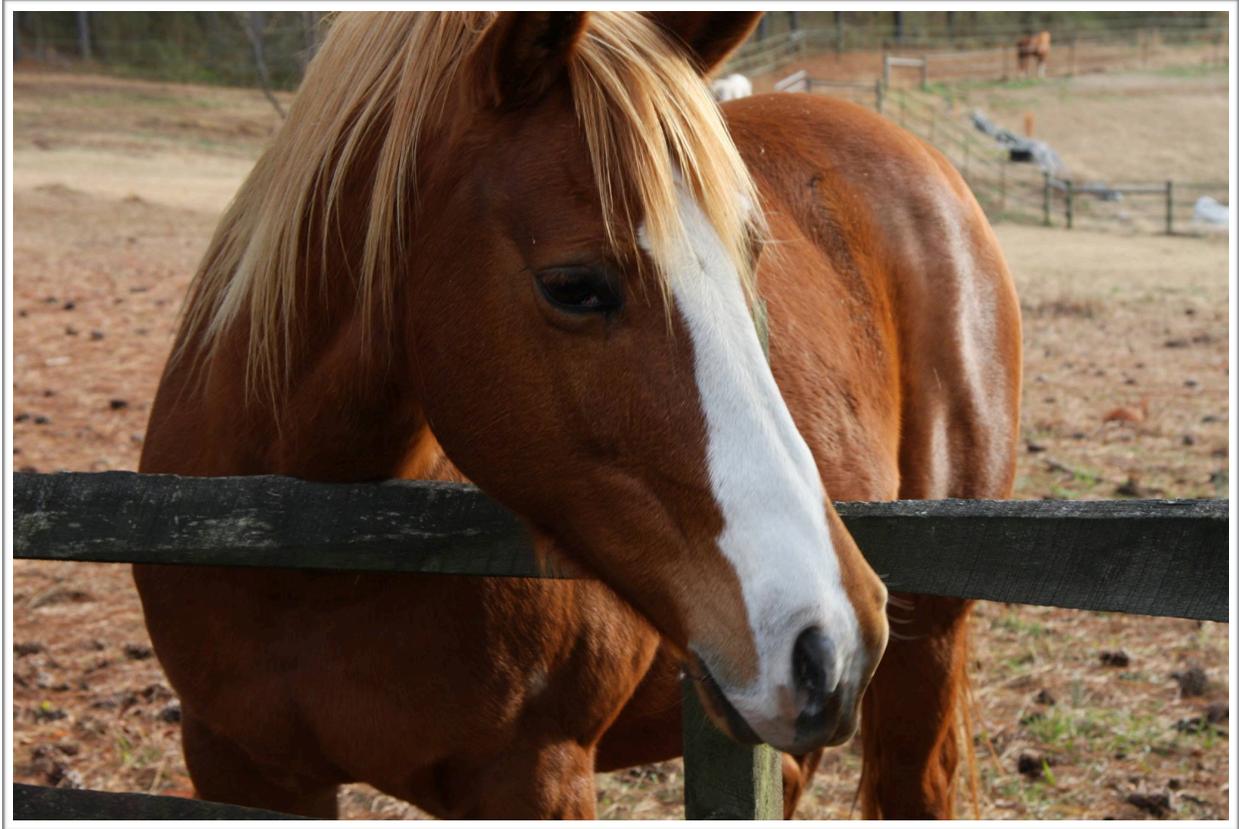


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by Therisa Couch

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The first time I became aware that not all horses would willingly agree to climb into a box on wheels, I must have been about 10 years old, a typical horse crazy girl that had no horse.

Well yeah, I did have a horse. My grandpa's plow horse or mule, whatever he happened to have, I claimed was mine. On some springtime Sunday visits out to the old home place, Grandpa would let me sit on his horse or mule as he walked behind, plowing rows. A few other times I would ride bareback down the driveway. My sister rode down that driveway too, 'til the horse took off in a dead run and out the road.

Parents, grandparents and siblings were screaming "JUMP!" And jump she did, rolling off into the ditch. The horse was caught in a backyard on down the road sometime later. This is probably one reason to explain why I have the horse bug and my sister does not. Of course, the tree limb incident likely contributed but that is another story.

At the end of a cul-de-sac, about a mile or so as the crow flies, then through some woods, past a pond and another neighborhood from my suburban home, was a small farm. Small as in probably 5 or 6 acres with a home. A seemingly distant country area where a lot of the homes were on acreage and quite a few had small barns with horses. Development of homes on smaller lots in the area signaled the beginning of the end to keeping horses near town.

What drew me to sneak off through the woods? The pull of the old barn behind the home and the pasture to the side where a chestnut horse and a larger, probably much older grey gelding grazed.

I remember the old barn well with its moldy tack room and a couple of moldy old western saddles. There must have been halters, bridles and such. The wood feed troughs, dirt floor and step-down to the shed are still fairly vivid to me.

I never saw or met anyone that lived in the house on the farm. I do remember the last name of a girl about my age who lived across the road, Uldrich. Perhaps I asked her if I could ride one of the horses since I had seen her ride in the pasture, I think.

It would horrify a parent these days to find that their young daughter had just wandered off and entered a barn on a distant farm to pet some horses, and worse, put a saddle on one and rode away. At the age of about 9 or 10, I did just that. It would horrify and anger any barn owner too.

The old grey gelding must have been a kind and knowing soul. Maybe he had years of experience putting up with and packing kids, those kids had grown up and left him behind with his chestnut friend. My favorite place to go was down the road, through a field to a small pond. I would urge the grey into a trot hoping he would hop a fallen log near the pond and not stop to step over. The day I showed up in my own back yard riding the grey was the day my mom found out about my adventures. I do not remember getting scolded or mom expressing any concern. Maybe the reaction was, "That's nice dear."

One Saturday I was invited by the Uldrich dad to ride the grey horse in a walk trot class at a horse show being held in another town. Uldrich daughter would ride in an English class on the chestnut. There is no memory of how I got to the show grounds. I do remember realizing I was poorly dressed compared to the sequined western attired kids on spiffy horses. The class of kids was huge, when we were told to line up I knew there was no chance to place but I was proud of the grey horse.

My most vivid memory of that morning is of entering the show barn to look for Uldrich daughter, the chestnut and the grey. There was no chestnut. The chestnut had put up a heck of a fight. No way it would load in the trailer, even with the grey friend on board, so the chestnut was left behind.

I remember very well how disappointed I was, selfish kid I guess. I would have to share "my" grey horse. I wonder if Uldrich daughter felt the same that day?