

Dufresne's Story: by Kerri Lake

A friend of mine was looking to buy a horse that could be a backyard buddy, a friend to their current quarter horse mare and new member of the family. She didn't want to spend a lot of money, so I suggested we go to the local monthly horse auction to see if we might rescue one of the horses from a potential death sentence.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with horse auctions, many times the meat buyers end up taking the unwanted animals at low prices. There are always horses there who have plenty of life left and just need someone to show up and recognize their value, see their heart, and offer them a space where they can just be a loved horse.

We found a few older horses who seemed to be dumped at the auction but still had life left and love to give. My friend decided to bid on two of them.

As the auction proceeded, the horses she liked both went to good homes at good prices. In fact, on that day most of the horses went to good homes! It was refreshing, actually.

Toward the end, the wranglers herded two young bay Arab/Arab-cross stud colts into the ring. It was clear they hadn't been handled and were not in good shape. I didn't see them out in the paddocks before the auction - I think they were brought in at the last second to avoid the scrutiny of potential buyers. They ran around the auction pen, scared and defensive. Nobody raised their arm to place a bid before they were run back out of the auction house. Too small to interest the meat buyers, I believe they went to the Mexican rodeo.

The following month my friend and I went back to the auction yard with high hopes. Again, she saw one or two horses that peaked her interest, so we found our seats and waited for the bidding to begin.

The auction went by much like the previous month. The horses she liked went for prices higher than she wanted to pay and found good homes.

And again, just like the previous month, at the very end of the auction, the wranglers herded in one young bay Arab/Arab-cross who was too small to interest the meat buyers. I immediately recognized him as the smaller of the two we saw at the end of last month's auction. He was frantic, traumatized, terrified and was clearly in pain.

The auctioneer launched the bidding at \$500. I heard people chuckle under their breath as if to say, "Yeah...not for THAT thing..."

The price came down, and down as buyers watched this lonely horse search for some

escape. \$300...\$200...\$100... I felt a mixture of disgust and anger that these people were so incapable of seeing the beauty and will to live in this horse. I saw it, I knew I could help him, but I wasn't there to buy a horse.

Finally, the auctioneer slowed down and said, "Okay folks, who will take this guy home for fifty bucks?"

...ME, apparently! I felt my arm shoot up into the air, declaring to the entire crowd that my heart is the softest.

BANG! The gavel came down, and I now owned a 2 year old Arab-cross who had just been gelded, had no training and a terrible start in life. It's a good thing my friend brought her horse trailer!

Like I said, I did not go to the auction looking to buy a horse. At that point in my life I didn't know if I would have a home for the next month, and my marriage was going poorly at best. But in this particular moment, nothing was more important than helping set this horse on a new path in life.

I paid my \$50 in the auction office, plus tax, and bought a \$7 plastic halter.

The clerks in the office looked at me a little funny and said, "Oh, YOU'RE the one who bought that colt. You'd better be careful. He's out to kill someone."

I wasn't worried.

Out in the paddock yard people collected their horses, either the ones they bought or the ones they didn't sell. I saw my new horse alone in a large paddock. I walked over to the gate and stood there for a while. I just stood there, watching him, letting him watch me, smell me, feel me.

One of the cowboys walking by, swinging his rope. He said to me, "You know, that colt is dangerous. He's out to kill somebody. You won't be able to catch him...it took SIX of us to get him in the trailer last time. You let me know, and I'll come rope him for you when you're ready."

"Okay. Thank you." I replied, and he walked away, confident of my failure.

I stayed quiet at the gate and started looking at what kind of condition this boy was really in. He had patches of bare skin where he had fallen or his hair had been whipped away. He had scars where his mouth had been tied shut with a wire. His legs were covered with cuts and sores, and I was surprised when I noticed that he had one white sock - it was hard to see through the caked dirt and dried blood from a wound slightly higher on his leg. All of these wounds were evidence to me that he had been at the Mexican rodeo where horses are whipped into a frenzy so they'll run blindly. The men display their skill by roping the frantic horse's front legs, bringing them crashing to the ground.

His eyes were still strong and bright, though. He was very aware and alive. His spirit was so strong, totally committed to resisting any attempt to force him into servitude. I was in love with him already!

My sense is that this colt refused to run. My sense is that he chose to stand and be whipped rather than play along with the tripping, and it landed him back at the auction.

He had been through so much, seen so much confusion and pain, and he still emanated the will to not only live, but live free of domination and servitude.

I didn't want to own this horse, I didn't want to train him. I wanted to be his friend.

We stood quietly together on opposite sides of the fence for about 15 minutes. I watched him as he discreetly watched me. Keeping my own mind clear, I opened my heart to give him the best chance to assess for himself who I truly am, what I'm about and whether I was here to fight him or to help him.

I opened the gate and stepped into the paddock as if I belonged there. His body faced away from me, and I stayed at least 20 feet away from him. His left ear followed me until I stopped moving my feet. When I did, he turned his head to get a square look at me.

With the plastic halter hanging from my shoulder, I said "Hello" silently. I did not approach him. I did not reach out to him with my hand. I stood still, breathing, sharing with him my sense of relief that he had truly found escape from that life of torture.

He let out a big breath and refocused on me, scanning me more deeply. As he did, I took a half step back, letting him know that I understand, that I intend no threat. After another five minutes of silent stillness, I turned away and left the paddock.

The auction yard wranglers were watching from behind the fences and around the corners. They KNEW I was crazy. They KNEW I'd never be able to catch this rogue, that I'd never be able to handle him. After all, it took six of them to move him!

I took a break, walked away for ten minutes or so, and talked with my friend about bringing the trailer around. She backed her four horse stock trailer up to a wide chute area, and the guys planted themselves up on the fences to watch the show.

"You're gonna need a rope!" they assured me.

"Okay...thanks." was all I said.

I was quite happy for their attention, honestly. Call it pride or my own sense of competition, but I wanted them to see what kindness, communication and acceptance can accomplish.

I went back to the paddock and walked directly in. I stepped within about ten feet of him and showed him the halter. He turned his head again to watch me, his feet stock-still.

Silently, I communicated to him, "I'd like you to wear this halter and follow me up through this barn to a large trailer where there is hay and soft bedding. I want to take you where you can eat grass and rest with no whips and no ropes."

He felt my offer, contemplated it for a moment and let out a deep sigh. His eyes softened, although not in submission, and he lowered his head in gesture of his acceptance.

I walked straight up to him and gently fit the halter around his head. He exhaled and licked his lips. I turned myself toward the gate as if he and I had already done this walk hundreds of times together. With the slightest pressure on the halter, I asked him to come with me. The gentle release when he responded communicated to him that trapping him

was not my intent. He followed me directly, out the gate and up the breezeway of the auction lot holding pens.

And the wranglers watched in silence.

This young horse, my new hero, felt a bit claustrophobic as we walked past the holding pens, surrounded by gates and fences, shadows and metallic sounds, but he chose to trust me and walk with me. When we made it to the other end of the paddock area, where the trailer was waiting, we had an audience. But this horse and I were focused on each other. I was focused on bringing him safely, gently into the trailer, he was focused on not being beaten.

We walked into the wide chute area toward the trailer, and I kept walking, again as if he and I had done this together a thousand times. I held thoughts and pictures and sensations in my mind of a young, spirited bay horse traveling safely and comfortably to a place with a large grass pasture and the company of a young quarter horse mare. I saw the picture of him walking gently into the trailer, I felt, even before we stepped into the trailer, the rocking of the trailer floor, the sounds of hooves on the trailer floor, and the rattles you hear when it's holding the weight of a horse. All of these pictures and senses I held with an open heart and offered to him in preparation of the next step in our journey. I felt how this particular trailer, on this particular day was destined to deliver a special horse to freedom.

Beyond any hope or expectation I could have had, he followed me straight into the trailer with no hesitation. No stopping to sniff, not even a blink of an eye, and he was standing in the trailer munching hay off the floor like an old pro.

He flicked his ears to let me know he understands, he's ready and it's time to go. So without ceremony, I closed the trailer door, climbed into the truck and headed home. At the time, I didn't even think to say goodbye to our audience, to talk to anyone or ask their response...all I remember was silence.

I called this giant horse in a small body Dufresne (pronounced doo-FRANE) after the main character in one of the most satisfying stories I know, The Shawshank Redemption. Andy Dufresne, in the story, was wrongfully imprisoned for over twenty years, endured unspeakable abuse, and finally, quietly, revealed the injustices of his jailers and escaped through sewer pipes to spend the rest of his days on a Pacific coast beach.

Dufresne settled into his new pasture home immediately. His wounds healed faster than wounds are supposed to heal, his hair grew back and he gained weight overnight.

He was immeasurably happy to give his attention, to learn about saddling, hoof care, and the other more pleasant parts of how humans and horses share their lives. Like a kid walking into a candy store for the first time, he'd walk around the pasture with long grass hanging out of his mouth, his whole body engaged in a smile, born again into a completely different world.

The above photo is Dufresne the day we brought him home