

Beyond the Homestretch



What Saving Racehorses Taught Me
About Starting Over, Facing Fear &
Finding My Inner Cowgirl

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INTRODUCTION



SEABISCUIT WAS A BAD-TEMPERED ROGUE, a willful loser at the track — until he found a trainer and jockey who understood him. From then on, he was unstoppable, a fierce competitor who consistently outran horses of much better physiques and pedigrees. He was the ultimate underdog. The crowds loved his cocky spirit and working-class ethos. Seabiscuit also loved Pumpkin, his kindly palomino pony horse, and he had a sweet habit of falling asleep on his cross-country train rides.

Secretariat was born on a lost coin toss, his birth representing a second-choice foal for his owner. He blasted the racing world like no other horse, with his tremendous height, deep stride, and overpowering Triple Crown win. Affectionately dubbed “Big Red,” he was the Muhammad Ali of racehorses, brash, charismatic, and full of himself. His jockey, Ron Turcotte, rarely had to raise his crop or urge him on verbally — Big Red had a deep passion to win on his own. His autopsy revealed a heart three times the size of a normal horse’s, a discovery that surprised no one who knew him or watched him win.

Seattle Slew, the 1977 Triple Crown winner, was born plain but athletic. One visitor commented that he had legs like telephone poles, straight, thick, and strong. A dynamic personality, Slew became so excited before

each race that he would pirouette madly in the post-parade, a striking display of such strutting machismo that viewers christened it “the war dance.” Tremendously intelligent, Slew was well-mannered off the track, showing special gentleness with children visitors. And for some odd reason, he loved snow and cold weather, seeming to happily anticipate each winter.

But what if Secretariat or Seattle Slew had been injured as two-year-olds? Or if Seabiscuit had never found Tom Smith and Red Pollard? We would never have known their incredible spirits and capacity for greatness, not to mention their entertaining quirks, such as loving snow or napping on freight cars. They still would have had all of that personality, that fire, that potential — just no racing career to bring it out, to give them purpose and challenge. What would have happened to Secretariat, Seattle Slew, and Seabiscuit then?

Every year, thousands of Thoroughbreds wash out of racing due to age, lack of speed, or injury. Often left to uncertain fates with auction houses, used-horse dealers, and inexperienced racehorse owners, they can even be at risk for the slaughter pens in Mexico or Canada. An equine athlete is a terrible thing to waste, especially one bred to give his all, to excel, to be the best.

I work with these athletes every day. Our organization — LOPE, or LoneStar Outreach to Place Ex-Racers — is a nonprofit devoted to finding Texas racehorses new jobs after their racing careers are over. We do this through our online services and adoption ranch. Over 145 horses have come to our ranch since 2004.

At the ranch, I have worked with every kind of racehorse — from the two-year-old youngster who is too slow to the game champion who still races at age nine to the twenty-year-old broodmare who ran in 114 races. I have seen all types of injuries and ailments: bowed tendons, bone chips, torn ligaments, slab fractures, paralyzed flappers, even tracheotomies.

To me, racehorses are winners even after their racing careers end. They have so much heart, athleticism, and intelligence — all they need is a chance to find that second career after the finish line. Of course, they

could use a little help making that transition. Because it can be hard to change careers at first.

I can sympathize with that.

I used to have an accounting career, working in a Washington, DC, cubicle. Pale, stressed, and full of suburban angst, I was the least likely candidate to run a racehorse adoption ranch in Texas. Back then, horses were just my outlet, my weekend respite from spreadsheets. Only learning to ride as an adult, I took group horseback-riding lessons and strained to master the most basic equestrian skills.

But even then, I was drawn to racehorses — several resided at that stable, in training to become show jumpers and polo mounts. They charmed and inspired me, with their intelligent faces, beautiful conformation, and dark reputations as risky rides.

From childhood, I had secretly wanted to be a horse trainer. But I was a horse geek, a real goober around the barn. The instructors and trainers hid their smiles at my barn gaffes and painfully anxious riding style. Every trainer at the barn had grown up with horses, usually turning professional by their teens, a formidable résumé of equine mastery. I would never fit that mold — how could someone like me be a trainer? It seemed like an impossible, silly dream, plausible only in a Disney film.

I worked hard to improve my skills anyway: exercising polo ponies for free, trading barn work for lessons, teaching at a horse summer camp, anything to learn more on my modest budget. Slowly, my horse activities morphed into a vocation, a calling I could no longer ignore, however ridiculous it seemed to others — and often even to me.

Finally, I took the plunge, moved halfway across the country, and opened the racehorse adoption program.

At first I was an inept career counselor for the racehorses. My background in horse training was sketchy, and I had no experience managing a farm. So many racehorses came to our little farm so quickly, almost forty in the first year alone. I had to figure out how to work with them in spite of my poor skills, my fears, and my persistent sense of being an impostor.

Ashamed of my beginner status, I searched far and wide for horsemanship gurus, hoping to find training “Obi-Wans” who could turn me into a sophisticated professional. I longed to be more like the trainers I knew — brave, tough, full of expertise.

Meanwhile, more and more racehorses kept coming with their assorted ailments, sports injuries, and high-strung natures, all clamoring for help and intervention. They didn’t have time to wait around for me to find the perfect tutor. So my on-the-job training program began immediately — run by the very best mentors of all.

PART I



The Starting Gate

*Let me respectfully remind you —
Life and death are of supreme importance,
Time swiftly passes by and opportunity is lost,
Each of us should strive to awaken, awaken!
Take heed. Do not squander your life.*

BUDDHIST PRAYER
taped to my accounting office desk

CHAPTER ONE



Spider's Bad Day

IT WAS 3 A.M., and I was trying to decide whether to shove pieces of rubber hose up a horse's nostrils. Spider, the horse in question, stared at me dully. His head was swollen to twice its normal size, and truly epic amounts of saliva, mucus, and something else I was afraid to identify were oozing from his mouth and nose.

My flashlight, long overdue for new batteries, flickered sporadically — it wasn't helping me make my decision. The dim light scared three-year-old Spider and he flinched, trying to huddle in the darkest corner of the pen. He was miserable and confused and the last thing he wanted was a light in his face.

I was scared, too. It was critical to keep Spider's adrenaline down. His breathing was already so impaired by the snakebite venom. If he began to panic, nothing, not even the last-ditch rubber hoses, could save his life. I'd never performed emergency procedures with rubber hoses before, not even for the sheer learning pleasure of it. Note to self — maybe it was time to correct this gap in my horse husbandry skills.

Several hours ago, as my husband, Tom, had been driving home from work, he had seen Spider violently shaking his head. I had been out riding one of the ex-racehorses at our ranch, trying to teach a young filly that

there's a gait (actually, a couple of them) between walk and gallop. She was surprised — no one had pointed this out to her before.

By the time Tom got my attention and we ran to Spider's pasture, his nose was already starting to swell dramatically. We looked closely — two fang marks dotted his muzzle. He had been bitten right between the nostrils.

I speed-dialed our vet, Dr. Damon O'Gan, as I quickly led Spider toward the round pen near the field's gate. Spider had stopped shaking his head, but he was clearly in pain and kept balking at the lead rope. We made chaotic progress as Tom shooed Spider from behind, waving his arms and hat to keep him moving forward. Big John, Spider's pasture buddy, hovered around us anxiously, trying to help by crowding near Spider protectively. Normally, I would have been touched by John's devotion, but he was a huge horse with the proportions and gracefulness of a dinosaur — he nearly stepped on me twice. It was a distraction I didn't need.

Damon finally answered his cell phone. "Hello," he said in his Wyoming drawl. Even after several years in Austin, he never quite sounded like a Texan.

"Hi Damon, it's Lynn," I began.

"How are you?" Damon replied. He drew out this question with about three extra syllables and an odd offbeat iambic rhythm — as in, "Hoow arree you?" Damon never sounded flustered or rushed. I'm pretty sure I could call him in the middle of some huge task, like open-heart surgery on a horse in a field during a thunderstorm, and he would sound exactly the same ("Hello Lynn. Hoow arree you?").

"Fine, fine. Hey, I think Spider got bitten by a snake. He has fang marks right between the nostrils, and, God, his nose is swelling like an inch every ten seconds."

"Ah." Damon sounded relaxed and vaguely pleased. "That's very interesting. Lynn, can you tell me what the fang marks look like? How wide is the distance between them? Just an estimate is fine, no need to measure."

Great, no need to measure — because I don't usually carry a ruler in

case of measuring emergencies. Another horse husbandry gap to fill. I squinted at the fang marks. How do you describe fang marks? It looked like Dracula had bit Spider: two pinprick dots, each with a drop of blood, were almost perfectly centered between the nostrils. I relayed this cinematic information to Damon, hoping he wouldn't ask to me clarify which Dracula (Bela Lugosi? Gary Oldman?).

"Lynn, you'll need to give him a 10 cc dose of Banamine in the vein. Check him every hour, especially the breathing rate. It's going to get ugly, and we might have to come out for a temporary tracheotomy procedure."

Damon then launched into a technical lecture on rattlesnake bites and how they can cause massive swelling in the head and upper respiratory systems. Horses can breathe only through their nose, so they can't use their mouth as a backup breathing system as we do. If the nostrils get blocked, horses can't breathe. At all. Which is not good for activities such as being alive.

Damon broke my morbid train of thought with an odd and ominous question — "Lynn, do you have a rubber hose you can cut up?" I did, but why? He said, "Cut two pieces, each about eight inches long, and be ready to shove those up Spider's nostrils if he looks like he is about to stop breathing. If things turn the wrong way, there's no way I can get there in time. It will be up to you."

I pondered the unpleasant images that came to mind. Damon said, "Call me every hour or so and update me. I'm on call tonight, so I can come out anytime. And good luck."

AS I WATCHED SPIDER AT 3 A.M., that conversation replayed in my head. Spider looked worse than I ever imagined a horse could look. His head was one huge oval, with no sign of contour from his cheekbones, jaw, or other facial bones.

His nostrils were caked with creeping cascades of yellow foam, and their normally large openings were down to the size of a man's finger. When I touched his nose, it was no longer velvety and soft — instead it

felt like concrete. The hardness disturbed me the most: How could he breathe with such unyielding membranes in his nose? Worst of all, it hurt him. He tensed at my light touch, clearly in pain.

I never saw the rattler and was sobered by the damage one snake could inflict on a 900-pound horse. If Spider was in genuine peril from its bite, what would it do to a human? It was scary.

It seems strange that our pretty little twenty-six-acre ranch, just thirty minutes from Austin, would be home to such dangerous creatures. But Texas can be a wild and rugged place. It didn't seem untamed, as I looked around at the sturdy pipe fencing and large shade trees and listened to the occasional truck zoom by even at that late hour on Highway 21. But it can be, and I made a mental note to pay more attention to where I walked.

I snapped off the flashlight and sensed Spider relaxing a little in the dark. I walked slowly up to him, gently petted his neck, and put my ear close so I could listen to his watery breathing and count off the rate. I hoped for a good number, so the rubber hoses could stay in my jeans pocket. If the rate was too high, it would be time for emergency hose action.

In spite of his incredibly bad day, Spider put his head down and leaned against me looking for a pat. He was then only three years old and had never been ridden. He had been donated to our racehorse adoption program a few weeks before by a breeder getting out of the business. She loved Spider, her last homebred Texas Thoroughbred, and she had entrusted us with finding him a new home. Spider was a truly sweet colt, a 900-pound puppy with a happy-go-lucky disposition and a love of bananas that bordered on fetish.

As I counted his labored breaths, a finger of panic poked rudely at my mind. Pushing it away, I made an effort to think positive thoughts. I remembered the day I first met Spider. The breeder had donated nine of her horses to us. They had all arrived together in a huge semi-load-sized trailer.

The drivers opened the side gate first, and the mares tumbled out together down the ramp. The mares were all pretty and smart with lively

eyes, and they immediately cantered off to the round bale of hay in a corner of the field. They weren't interested in me yet; they had their priorities straight.

Alice, the matriarch of the mares at fifteen years old, took charge of the field and bossed the younger, less-favored mares away from the round bale. In spite of her long trip, she looked pleased that we had the good sense to serve dinner early. She gave me a detached appreciative look, the type that a suburban matron might give to a waitress who was prompt with the drink order. She was dark bay, with deep intelligent eyes and the impressive belly of a many-times mother.

Then the drivers opened the second gate on the trailer, and all the geldings, plus Spider the colt, came leaping down the ramp. The boys weren't quite as smart about the trailer exit as the girls — it took them a while to figure out where the hay was in their pasture. They milled around, jostling each other, like guys heading for the draft beer line in a sports bar. There was tall Solomon, a big affable horse with tremendously oversized ears for a Thoroughbred. Then came JJ, another dark bay who resembled Alice (his mother) but with a macho swagger. JJ and Solomon began nipping at each other and bucking in unison, not sure what to make of this new place.

Eclipse came next, the intellectual of the group, looking embarrassed by the frat-boy antics of his brothers. He lingered near me, wanting to introduce himself properly. He was a beautiful red horse with a striking crescent mark on his forehead and calm, gentle eyes.

Spider was the last one out, following his siblings' big act like a rookie comic in a variety show. As he clumsily scrambled down the ramp, one of the drivers turned to me and said, "That horse is a stallion. Better watch out for him. He might be dangerous."

I looked at Spider and laughed. Spider was the most Bambi-like stallion I'd ever seen. He was a chestnut horse with a cute little star and snip of white on his face. His legs were long and gangly, and he clearly didn't quite know how his body worked yet. His head was a tad big for his body,

and he had a sweet face. I couldn't help but like him on sight. He's just a kid, I thought to myself.

In the next few weeks, Spider established himself as the clown of the farm. He liked to turn over troughs and splash the water out. If he saw you in the pasture, he would run across the field to greet you, gangly legs flying, with a delighted "you-must-be-coming-to-see-me" look on his face. It was impossible to be in a bad mood around Spider's enthusiasm. Spider innately assumed that the universe was a benevolent, wonderful place where everyone was there to pet him.

I was looking forward to teaching Spider about ground work, saddles, and bridles. We had gelded Spider last week, and I was planning to start working with him in a few days. Poor Spider! In the past seven days he had been gelded, then bitten by a rattler. Not such a benevolent universe this month.

I felt so responsible for him. And I realized that right then, at the farm, in the middle of the night, I was the most qualified person to take care of him and to make the right decision. Damon was a solid drive away, Tom was not a horse person, and all of our immediate neighbors had less veterinary care experience than I did.

It wasn't an empowering feeling.

I concentrated on counting breaths, trying not to speculate about what exactly was dripping on my hair from Spider's face. The count was good. His breathing rate had stabilized from when I had last checked him an hour ago. The rubber hoses could stay in my pocket for now. I was too tired to walk back to the house, so I kept petting Spider. It wasn't much, but it was all I could think of to do. He wheezed and snuffled and kept leaning against me, not at all put off by my wet, stained shirt. My dirty jeans, grimy from riding, completed my ranch haute couture.

This was not the way I had planned to spend my forty-fourth birthday. Aren't people this age supposed to be confident and settled and at the very least not covered in horse mucus? Haven't they mastered their careers, gently settling into that "I'm watching the 401(k) plan grow" phase of life?

I pondered my previous life as an accountant. Had it really been so awful? I didn't remember any rattlesnakes or crushing sense of responsibility in that career. The offices were so clean and cool in August, not like this round pen in Texas, which still radiated heat at 3:15 A.M. The glamour of it all, I thought to myself. Spider nicely punctuated this thought by trying to rub his swollen head on me.

I spotted something white in the pen and bent down to pick it up. It was a napkin from dinner about six hours ago. It cheered me up to see it and be reminded of Tom. My internal whining faded, along with my fragmented panic, both overwhelmed by the distracting chatter in my mind.

Once we had given Spider his shot, all we could do was wait and watch the venom's progress. But I had been too worried to leave Spider, so Tom cooked a huge spaghetti dinner and brought it out to me in the field. We sat in his truck bed and had an oddly romantic al fresco dinner, quietly talking and watching Spider together. Spider's head was less swollen then. I could notice the night sky, always so big in Texas, and enjoy Tom's improvised truck-bed restaurant.

All of this business about changing careers was really Tom's fault. He was the one who started giving me those books on philosophy, the ones that make you think for yourself and indulge in other dangerous activities. *The Fountainhead. Man's Search for Meaning. How to Find the Work You Love.*

And music, too — Tom was always bringing me eclectic music. One of his first gifts to me was a Sur Sudha CD full of Nepali sitar music. I played it over and over again, as I planned my first trip to Nepal — just hearing the music made me feel bold and cool enough to attempt the trip. No wonder I had married him — how could I resist a man who courted me with philosophy and alternative music? And who catered me Italian dinners in the middle of dusty fields late at night?

Perhaps picking up on my soothing thoughts, Spider was now dozing lightly. He seemed to be in a relatively calm stupor. I tiptoed out of the pen, hoping to catch an hour of sleep before my next check on Spider. As I walked along the quarter-mile driveway to the house, thinking of Tom's philosophy books, I remembered why I had chosen this life.

I quickly glanced at the other horses to make sure all was well. That rattlesnake was still out there somewhere. Irish, the filly whom I had just taught the joy of trotting, was curled up like a sleeping cat. Zuper, our handsome, permanently retired gelding, stood guard over her.

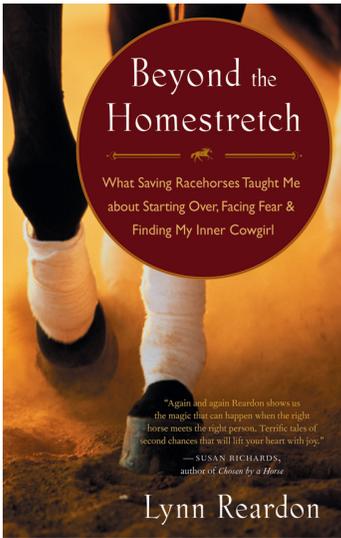
I looked down at my work boots to make sure nothing was slithering under them. My bootlaces caught the moonlight as I strode quickly and steadily down the driveway. Compared to my office days, my shoes were rugged, my jeans loose, and my physique muscular and fit. In my twenties, I was an out-of-shape, pale chain-smoker whose job never required anything more physical than hefting big blue payroll binders.

In that moment, I decided that very few women celebrate their forty-fourth birthday this way, and that it would make an excellent story to tell my nephews. They already thought I was a rock star just because I rode horses every day. This story would knock them dead.

It was guaranteed that the rest of the day would be better — with such a dubious start, my birthday was bound to improve.

Back at the house, I fell asleep quickly and had scattered, surreal dreams about my past life as an accountant mixed up with horse images — of racehorses wandering in file rooms, saddles stacked next to industrial-sized calculators, and Spider splashing in the office water cooler, his head normal and his universe benevolent once again.

(End of Chapter One Excerpt)



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A portion of proceeds will directly support LOPE's mission of providing Texas ex-racehorses with opportunities for new careers after their racing days end.

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