

LIFESTYLE

WHEN A GOOD HORSE REACHES THE END OF THE TRAIL, HIS OWNER FACES SOME TOUGH DECISIONS.

COWBOYS

INDIANS

by Wolf Schneider

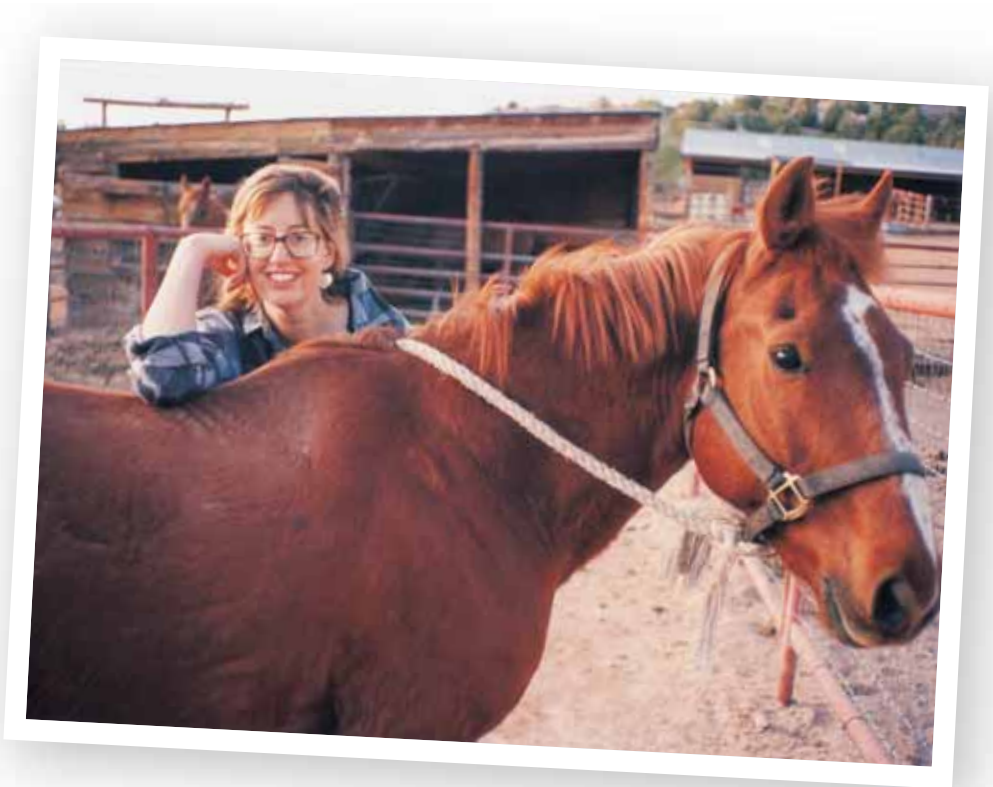
For the last 14 years at every job I've had, the receptionists all knew one thing: If a call comes in about my horse, Ryo, find me. Horses can go so quickly if they colic. Ryo never did colic, although his stall-mate Dante, an Arabian in his prime, did and was dead a day later. Ryo had looked up to Dante and grieved for him. I would outlive and grieve them both.

Ryo, a New Mexico mustang born in the wild, was so calm and dependable that my shoer called him blasé. At 14 hands and a sorrel color as rich as red chili powder, he was a small horse. Sturdy though. Big head, short thick neck, thoughtful eyes. Huge heart.

His first owner, Ramon, a teenaged wrangler at Santa Fe's Rancho Encantado, pointed out that he was also a bit of a loner. "All the horses get turned out together to play," Ramon said. "Ryo wanders off by himself." I saw it, and Ryo's quiet independence reminded me of my own. Ryo had been acquired by Ramon when Ramon's father traded an old car engine for the horse. Ramon named him Ryo—Spanish for "ray of light"—and Ryo spent his early years with Ramon running in back-country races, where the little horse acquired the nickname "The Little Bullet" for his speed. Ryo was galloped off cliffs into the Rio Grande and hauled around in the back of a pickup truck. By the time I bought him, when Ryo was 7 and Ramon was moving on to movie stunt riding, Ryo had had a world of experience—and, the vets later speculated, possible irreparable joint damage.

But back then, Ryo was still sturdy and all about freedom and faith. With his barn-mate Ringo, and Ringo's owner Tahlia, Ryo and I explored the vast Tesuque Pueblo lands, cantered through windy arroyos past sunflowers, and scrambled up sandstone cliffs into thickets of pinyon and juniper trees. "We can do it," was his attitude. And we always did. We outran the Indian patrol jeep once—my permit had expired—and many times after wandering for hours through the chaparral then returning home as dusk fell, I felt more courageous than ever in my life. Ryo taught me that.

When he was 9, I moved Ryo to Malibu and myself back to Los Angeles so I could find better magazine work. That year, Ryo was kicked by a mare, then began limping. He limped for months and was eventually diagnosed—four vets and many X-rays later—with arthritis and navicular syndrome. This diagnosis actu-



Ryo, age 8, in Santa Fe with author and companion Wolf Schneider.

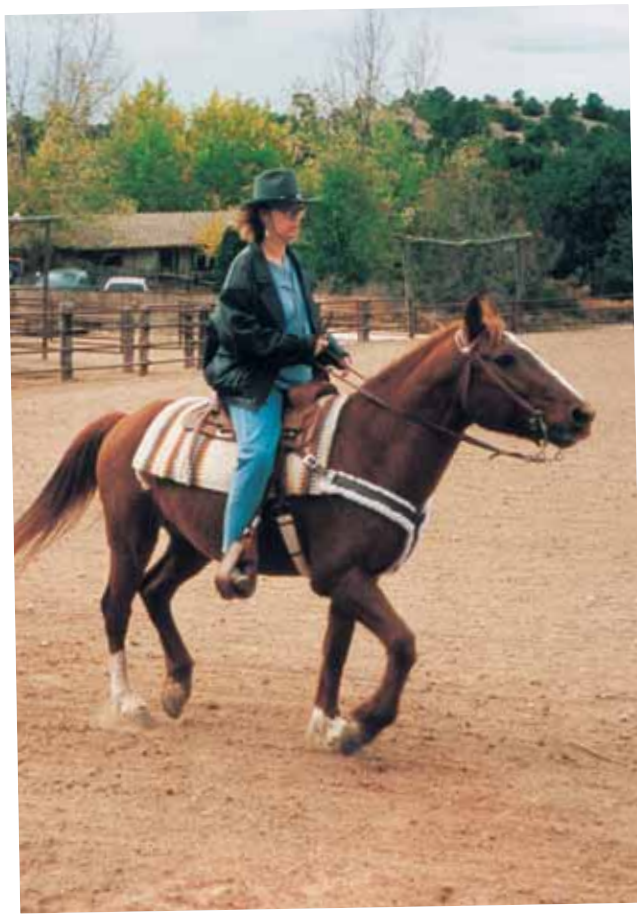
ally concurred with that of an animal psychic I consulted in desperation: She said that Ryo said that he had a problem even before the kick. Getting out her prescription pad, Marta, the vet who finally diagnosed him, cautioned, "From now on, only ride him on level land." So began our curtailed riding and Ryo's daily medicine packets that would continue for the rest of his life: ground-up pills of isoxsuprine and phenylbutazone (Bute), glucosamine, chondroitin sulfate, and A.B.C.'s Plus enzymes, all doused with pancake syrup and mixed with grain.

The drugs worked. So did the bar shoes with wedge pads. In a Zen kind of way, Ryo and I grooved to the same flat canyon trail to the Malibu waterfall every weekend: spongy earth underfoot in rainy winter, Indian paintbrush in spring, deer during summer, giant sycamore leaves falling in autumn. Occasionally, we still were daring. Ryo followed me trustingly through a tunnel to the beach; adrenalin surged through him at the immense Pacific Ocean yet he remained responsive. In the canyon once, a motorcyclist roared up, Ryo reared, and I fell off, suffering a concussion; Ryo stood faithfully guarding my body until a helicopter came for me and a barn buddy for him. The only time I got the urgent call at work was when the fires came to Malibu: Tranquil Ryo was loaded into the evacuation trailer first to encourage the other horses to load.

When Ryo was 16, we returned to Santa Fe. He had apparently gotten used to the good life in Malibu. At midnight when the hauler brought Ryo to me, my horse clambered off the trailer into the suburb of Tesuque dehydrated and shrunken. "He had water the whole time—wouldn't drink," the driver insisted. For four more days, Ryo still didn't drink. I had his stomach pumped. Twice. Another boarder soothed him with a massage. He finally sipped from the trough. And soon he was happy at his new serene barn, in a corral along Tesuque Creek and under shade trees.

ILLUSTRATION: PETER THORPE

PHOTOGRAPHY: HELENE SCHNEIDER



ABOVE: Ryo—he was also called “The Little Bullet” for his speed and “Everybody’s friend” for his gentle, loving nature—means “ray of light” in Spanish. Age 7, Santa Fe.
TOP RIGHT: Age 7, Rancho Encantado.
BOTTOM RIGHT: Age 8, Tesuque Indian land, New Mexico.
OPPOSITE: Age 10, Malibu. A New Mexico mustang born in the wild, Ryo was quietly independent, courageous, and faithful.



purple asters into his mane. He looked beautiful. But so stoic and sorrowful. He knew. I dumped more senior feed in his bucket; Ryo wouldn't eat. The barn owner surmised, “He knows the jig is up.” Other boarders arrived with huge pink roses and lavender. One of them hugged my horse and told him, “Ryo, you were so gentle—you were everybody's friend.” A car I didn't even recognize screeched up—somebody's husband. The barn owner muttered, “What is this? A frigging rock concert? Everybody has to be here?” In his own way, he was mourning, too.

When my vet drove in, the barn owner ushered the on-lookers away and I was grateful. The vet gave Ryo a small shot of sodium pentobarbital. Seconds later, my horse was wobbly. Now a larger shot. Ryo's legs buckled and he thumped over onto his side. The vet listened to Ryo's heart with a stethoscope until it ceased beating. My horse went so quickly and peacefully, it was hard to believe he was dead. The barn owner helped me cover Ryo with a blue blanket.

Everyone left, and I hunkered down next to Ryo. His legs and neck stuck out from the blanket. The roses and lavender rested on his strong neck, the purple asters lay in his mane. One of his gentle, trusting brown eyes was still open. I stroked his broad forehead and he felt exactly as he always had. I rested my head atop his, kissed him, and inhaled his musky scent mingled with the roses and rose oil. For three hours, I held onto him and he still felt warm. It could have been Ryo or the slanting sunlight. Or the heat of love and loss.

Eventually, when the death truck was due to arrive, I left the driver my check for \$150 and drove off into a world that was empty. I prayed that Ryo was galloping again like he used to, running with a spirit herd now. And that it wasn't the last I'd ever see of him.

PHOTOGRAPHY: TAHILIA VAN (LEFT AND BOTTOM) AND HELENE SCHNEIDER (TOP)

PHOTOGRAPHY: SANDY MESTROMONACO

10 Rituals for Goodbye

1. Cut off a lock of your horse's mane, tie it with a special ribbon, and place it in a pouch. Mix in your own hair after your next haircut.
2. Spend time daily with your horse before he goes. It'll be sad, but later on you'll have more memories.
3. “Don't waste a minute feeling like Dr. Death,” my friend Sandy advises. “When you get a pet, your part of the covenant is to care for them lovingly and humanely.”
4. Anoint your horse's head with an essential oil, one that smells particularly wonderful to you. Later on it will become “his scent” for you.
5. Braid wildflowers into your horse's mane in his last days. It's a way of showing respect and creating beauty... and everyone will compliment your horse, making the horse feel noticed.
6. Be there when your horse is put down. Hold onto the lead rope and be a comfort to your horse. Talk to him, pet him, let him know he was loved to the end.
7. Bring a blanket from home to put over your horse until the death truck comes. Take the blanket home afterward, and sleep with it if that is a comfort to you. Your horse's scent will linger awhile.
8. After the horse's passing, listen to the radio and your horse may speak to you through a song. When I was driving home from the barn, I could swear that Ryo, always so gentle and Ghandi-esque, spoke to me through the John Lennon song “Imagine.” Whenever I hear it now, I feel close to Ryo. If you and your horse had a special song, play it.
9. Create a horse shrine at home with photos, a memorial plant or flowers in the color of the season of their passing (I chose yellow), maybe a votive candle, and the lock of mane.
10. My friend Monika suggests that you meditate on your horse. You may get a “visitation” in the days following his departure. I did in yoga class, and it was hugely comforting to connect again across the astral planes. And always, you may hold out for the Rainbow Bridge and your healthy horse running just over on the other side.

—WS