

All the Pretty Little Horses

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Aaron Copland's arrangement is my favorite, a tale I have always loved singing and teaching to my voice students. Each time I encounter it, I am pulled back into the text by his magical musical challenges, unpredictable intervals, unexpected lingering, and his perfect marriage of music and text. Even the look of the score is captivating. But there is another reason this piece never fails to excite me.

There is nothing surprising about my love for horses. I'm not sure where it originated but from a young age, I couldn't get enough of horse everything! "Daddy, I'll keep it in my bedroom." and "Daddy, I'll tie it up outside my bedroom window." were among my schemes to get a horse.

I loved the majesty, strength, yet gentle nature of these powerful, loving beasts. Somewhat jealous that my younger Iowa cousin had a horse, I marveled at the barrel racing course my uncle had set up for her. I imagined their hours together, Uncle Vern watching his daughter Kay making her way around the barrels without hitting them, riding faster and faster until she was ready to compete.

It didn't always happen on our trips to visit our Iowa relatives, because we traveled to see both sides of the family, but when I had a chance to ride Kay's horse, I jumped at it. Now that I was on this thing, it was intimidating, but I fought my fear and tried to hold the powerful animal at a pace I felt safe. The trip to the intersection was fine, enjoyable even, but when we turned around, oh boy! He was used to running full speed back to the barn and his treats! Yikes! I held on for dear life but stayed with him. Even knowing that this would happen, I rode every visit if given the chance.

I no longer remember when I bought my first one, the beginning of my ceramic horse collection, all about the same size but each unique. They became my souvenir shopping item whenever our family traveled. We usually camped but Dad loved to drive and see the country so we had ample opportunities to look for more souvenir horses. After I saved and bought the first couple, even my parents joined the search, looking for horses different from my others. The one I remember best was a beautiful light caramel color, a front hoof raised in a prance, head up, rearing to go, that my dad enthusiastically found for me.

For a long time, my horses lived on shelves mounted on the pegboard Dad had installed on a wall of my bedroom. The shelves could be rearranged as suited my whims and were a place where I displayed my treasures, favorite books, or anything I chose. Guess I should have left them there.

One day, I decided a change was in order. I carefully placed my horses at the back of my dresser, safe from the edge. I gently dusted them every Saturday and rearranged them proudly.

There, on the dresser, I could enjoy them frequently when I sat down to do my hair, what little makeup I wore, or check out my outfit in the mirror. Seeing them more often made me happy, the motivation for moving them from a shelf.

Imagine my shock and horror when I came into my room one afternoon, to find my toddler brother perched precariously on my chair reaching for them! He, too, was fascinated. I told him to leave them alone and even Mom scolded him. My parents knew and respected my most treasured possessions, my horses. Well, eventually the attraction was too much for the little guy. When I caught him in the act yet again, all had been broken in some way, a leg here, two legs there, pieces chipped off, hopelessly beyond repair.

I don't recall what I said that attracted Mom's attention. She ran into my room to find me bemoaning the damage to my precious ceramic horses, and my little brother, innocently unaware that he had done anything wrong. Dad offered to try to glue them back together and I considered it, for a minute, but decided that they were too far gone. They would never again be my beautiful free-spirited horses. Into the trash they went.

Was I upset that my baby brother had broken my prize horse collection, yes! I don't remember even thinking about the loss of my long-saved allowance and birthday money. My horse collection was no more. But I realized that my little brother was more important. He really didn't know that he was doing anything wrong. He was attracted to them, too, and the temptation was just too great. I grew up quite a bit that day but I still love all pretty horses.