

I had just turned 21 and moved away for college. I had a little bit of income and figured I didn't eat much, so I decided to buy myself a horse – my first horse – as a birthday gift to myself. I had this vision of a beautiful golden horse with a flowing mane and a tail that dragged the ground. My budget for making my dream come true was \$500. Back in the 80's in central Florida, horses were actually more expensive than they are now, so I quickly revised my dream to pretty much anything in my price range. I ended up at a working cattle farm not far from Ocala, agreeing to buy a pinto Mustang since they didn't have any Palomino's and the price was right. Now, I've never favored Pintos, but he was only \$450, so he looked good to me! I agreed to his bridle for an extra \$30, and figured I was getting a steal – a rideable horse and bridle for \$480! We were walking back to my vehicle to get the cash when I saw him...my Palomino, just standing there, loaded in a trailer. I stopped dead in my tracks and said, "What about him? Is he for sale? How much for him? I have to have him," and so on. The man I was doing business with told me no, I didn't want him, he was dangerous and on his way to the kill sale. We argued, and long story short, for an extra \$20 – making it an even \$500 – the Palomino was coming home with me! Of course, he wouldn't take the pinto back, meaning I was taking two horses, but that was a minor detail to me at the time. I was swooning and completely in love, even though the horse had never even gotten off the trailer!

The next day my new horses were delivered. I had never been more excited! The transport truck pulled up to my gate and one of the guys hopped out and proceeded to tell me exactly what he thought of my new Palomino (none of which is printable) and said they were on their way to the hospital since my precious baby had broken the arm of his compadre. Surely they were mistaken, I thought. Then I watched as they backed up to the gate, opened the trailer and out shot a yellow devil! He flew out of the trailer and proceeded to tear across the pasture at a full gallop, right into a fence pole (luckily a sturdy one), which gashed his head open and sent him to the ground. As he lay there bleeding and the dust swirled in the air from the departing truck and trailer, I started to wonder for the first time if maybe I had been a little hasty. But having never been one to dwell on such things, I just shrugged and figured I would "fix" him.

The name he came with was Bit O' Honey, but I just called him Bitta. It took three months before he was comfortable letting me touch him. Three long months of sleeping in the barn, sitting in the pasture for hours, and doling out handfuls of grain to try and win him over. Three months of my life, during which time I learned the true meaning of patience. It wasn't easy and I discovered the scars, both physical and mental, that made him what he was. But he was a quick learner. Once he decided he could trust me, he trusted me fully. By the sixth month, there was nothing he wouldn't do if I asked him.

He could never wear a bit – his mouth had been too damaged. But he was fine in just a halter and I never felt unsafe with him. He became my best friend. The pinto didn't last long, but Bitta was my life. Whatever whim I got suited him fine. He traveled well, was an easy keeper, was friendly and always more eager for human company over other horses. He ended up moving into my back yard and became like a dog, even wandering inside the house when I left the door open! Six years passed and my life situation changed. I had to let him go. I sold him with a promise of first right of refusal should they ever let him go. I contacted his new owners every now and then as my life got more stable but they were happy with him. He never left my mind and I always missed him and regretted not making choices that allowed me to keep him. Ten years went by and I got a phone call. They couldn't keep him anymore. He was in his 20's now and I hadn't seen him in 10 years. Didn't matter. I said yes, yes, yes, and then told my husband. Luckily he understood.

Bitta was different now. I guess we both were. But he remembered me. And boy, was he mad! I got a joyous greeting and then a couple weeks of the cold shoulder. He took to my husband and, even to this day, is the best horse there ever was, in my husband's opinion. He fitted right in with my family and seemed content. I didn't ride him so much now. I had other, younger, horses and he felt his age. Arthritis had set in and he was grumpy now and then, and prone to a bit of attitude. But he still loved people better than horses and would hang out with us on our front porch, sharing beer and peanuts with my husband or Mountain Dew and Doritos with my son.

It just felt right having him there. I didn't spend the kind of time with him that I had before, but we were both content, being back together. He was such an ambassador, treating everyone like they were special. He was patient with kids and carried even the most timid ones in a way that made them feel safe. I'm still convinced that there has never been another horse quite as special as Bitta.

We lost him early in 2007 – before his time - to an injury from a more active pasture-mate who managed to make a badly placed kick. He was somewhere between 27 and 29 at the time, still going strong, and still just as beloved as when he was the horse I once dreamed of as a kid. I miss him still and, even more amazingly, so does my husband, who's not much of a horse person. But Bitta wasn't just a horse to us. He was family.