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Being Realistic

The stallion galloped through the open field, with vast wilderness spread behind him. Spirit's hooves quickened in pace as he reached the top of a cliff, where he skidded to a stop and reared triumphantly.

My eight year old eyes were glued to the TV screen, still just as focused on the scene for the tenth rewatch as the first. I was so invested in the story of this horse, that I had to learn what they were like in real life.

"You're going to get bored of it," my mom said, when I asked her to enroll me in riding lessons. I assured her that I would not. I would ask every morning for months. Eventually my begging got through to her, and she signed me up at the local riding stables.

My first lesson was on an old and graying brown horse named Zen. He looked nothing like Spirit from the movie, but I was immediately entranced by him. The instructor simply led me around the arena at a walk, pony ride style. Despite how boring this looked for any onlookers, I was completely and utterly captivated.

I took weekly lessons for many years after that, improving bit by bit. When my instructor asked me to teach some beginner lessons, I was ecstatic. It was an easy job, where my teen self would lead a younger kid around on the smallest pony, Honeybee. I was in charge of what to teach them, which now thinking back on it, was a lot of responsibility for a fifteen year old with no professional teaching experience. I would set up poles on the ground and small jumps, and run next to Honeybee as she toted the kid along.

I taught a few kids each week, and one kid I specifically remember was a girl named Bella. She was on the older side of my usual "students," and was very timid. She was only a few years younger than me, and was the oldest student I taught. She looked a little odd sitting on Honeybee, since she was pretty tall, but she claimed that this was the only pony that she would ride, since the others were too big. I taught her for about a year, and got her to even ride without me holding onto Honeybee. I was proud of her progress. Bella left the barn after a year for a new place, and we both went on with our lives.

I enjoyed my weekly lessons throughout high school. I rode a pretty appaloosa mare named Paris, who wasn't the fanciest horse, but she was calm and was very good with dealing with students. She wasn't mine, but I made sure to enjoy every minute I had with her.

After my lesson ended one Thursday, I checked my instagram feed. I saw that Bella had posted, and it was a picture of a horse. I was curious, so I read the caption. Her dad had just bought her a beautiful horse. The picture was the gelding being ridden over jumps, and the caption said something along the lines of: "So excited for my new horse! He's being imported to the US from Europe in a few weeks." Just by looking at the image, I could tell that this horse was expensive. Close to \$100,000, most likely. He was a handsome young warmblood who could jump over five feet, and he was from Europe. I felt my heart sink a bit.

Yes, I was happy that she had a horse, and happy that a student that I taught had this

opportunity. However, it still stung. I looked over at Paris, who was happily munching on the grass. I was grateful to be here with her, but she wasn't mine. I only got to see her once a week. I taught Bella how to ride, and now she has surpassed me, simply because her dad had the money to give her that push.

When I was younger, I would ask my parents for a horse for every birthday or christmas. I would open my presents, and with each one I would feel a small rush of hope, only for it to diminish once I saw that it wasn't what I was looking for. I was hoping for a piece of paper saying "get in the car," and then a drive to the stable where my dream horse would be waiting for me in one of the stalls. I got this idea from the countless youtube videos where girls my age would get a horse in this way. I wanted to be like them, however I did not know how hard it was to attain an experience like this for a child. I still loved any gifts given to me by my parents, I just was too young to realize that they couldn't afford to give me more. I had two other siblings that they had to provide for, and they were saving to help us with our college education. I had unrealistic expectations for what my parents could afford, since my point of reference was these other kids who would get whatever they wanted.

My parents were giving me everything they could, which was my weekly riding lessons and one competition a year. As I grew older, I realized that fact, and I accepted that I would not get a horse of my own. It still hurt to realize that I could not afford what the other girls could. When I saw the same videos of kids getting surprised with their own horses as gifts, I would promptly skip past them. I knew I couldn't obtain the experience that they had, which still hurt despite my acceptance.

I took advantage of the time I did have with horses, and enjoyed my time in the stables as much as I could. I was still jealous of the experience that the other girls had, but now I had a realistic idea in mind. I took care of Paris and spent all the time that I could with her. For one birthday, my parents even paid for me to quarter-lease her for a month, so I was able to ride her twice a week instead of just once. I remember having so much fun that month, going to the barn more than usual and not having to worry about time limits while being there. I was able to spend as much time as I'd like with Paris, just hanging out with her and riding around the arena at my own pace.

I love taking lessons, but being able to just do whatever you'd like while riding is extremely appealing to me. I don't need to show or jump super high, I just like spending time with the horse and riding around by myself. When I was younger, I thought this was only attainable by owning my own horse. However, at that point in time (and now) it was not possible for me to afford that.

In the future, I plan on keeping horses in my life. I'm not sure what my experience will be, but I will do whatever I can afford. Some people are able to spend more on their hobbies than others, and I'm not sure how much income I will have at the moment. Ideally I will be at least able to take my weekly lessons, or even lease a horse. I would love to do so and have the experience that I did for those few weeks where I quarter-leased Paris. I want to spend time around these animals, and I know that I will find a way to at least achieve that goal.

