

DEMI

The Horse Who Changed Everything



Karen Katzmark

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For Demi

Prologue

Why Demi?

I have known many horses.

Some challenged me. Some frightened me. Some made me laugh. Some stood quietly beneath my hands and taught me things I could never have learned from a book.

But there was only one Demi.

Even after all these years, what stays with me most is not how much Demi changed my life, but how completely she became part of it.

She wasn't the first horse I rode. I wasn't an accomplished equestrian when I met her. We didn't build our relationship around competition, ribbons, or accomplishments. In the beginning, she wasn't even technically my horse.

She was a strawberry roan mare, about fifteen hands, with a copper-speckled coat, a light silver mane and tail, a kind face, and plenty of opinions. She was experienced and patient, but never passive. She could be sassy enough to remind me that she had ideas of her own.

Looking back, sometimes it seems as though Demi had been calling me long before I met her. In 2000, years before I knew her name, I had taken riding lessons and was attending massage school. I couldn't have known where any of it would lead. I only know that when Demi finally entered my life, something about her already felt familiar.

I have often said Demi felt like my horse before I even met her. There was no bill of sale or transfer of ownership. I simply felt it.

Years later, I would still be carrying her name with me.

But that comes much later.

Before the bodywork, before the training, before the surgery and rehabilitation, before I understood anything about what Demi would eventually mean to me, there was simply Demi.

And a morning when I climbed onto her back.

Chapter One

Go Ride Demi

Before Demi entered my life, a woman came into my massage practice. I was working with a chiropractor in San Juan Capistrano, and during one of our conversations I told her that I had always wanted to learn equine massage.

She told me about Equinology and later brought me the curriculum.

I was interested, but I hesitated. The tuition intimidated me. So did the question of what I would actually do with the training. I knew massage. I loved horses. But I didn't have the kind of horse background that made me feel as though I naturally belonged in that world professionally.

Maybe someday.

I put the information aside and continued working with people.

Around that same time, I became friends with a woman through my spiritual community. I sometimes house-sat for her when she traveled. One day, while staying at her house, I mentioned that I was bored.

She told me to go ride Demi.

That simple suggestion changed my life.

Demi was boarded at a local stable. My friend showed me her tack and explained some of Demi's quirks—how she liked things, and her fondness for what we called her “yummy muck,” made of grain and molasses soaked with water.

Then I met her.

A strawberry roan mare with far more experience than I had.

It had been years since I had ridden regularly, and I wanted to make sure I still knew what I was doing—for my friend and for

myself. With her nearby giving me tips, I got on Demi and worked through the basics.

We walked. Trotted. Changed direction. Made figure eights. Stopped. Backed.

It wasn't a performance. I was checking myself.

Could I still ride? Could I communicate clearly? Could I handle this horse safely?

Demi seemed willing to give me the opportunity to find out.

I came back the next day.

Then again.

And again.



Demi.

Chapter Two

The Mornings Belonged to Us

I was living in San Clemente and working as a massage therapist. I had recently returned from Thailand, and there was no shortage of work to fill my days.

I began moving appointments. Whenever I could, I scheduled clients after noon so I could spend my mornings at the barn.

Chuck came with me.



Chuck, my companion during the Tar Farms years.

He was my black Lab–Chow mix, a dog with an old soul who became part of the rhythm of those years. I would help him into the car, make my morning stop, and then head toward the stable. By around eight, I could be there.

While I groomed and saddled Demi, Chuck might lie in the sun or wander quietly nearby. He wasn't demanding. He was simply part of the morning.

I brushed Demi. Cleaned her feet. Mucked stalls. Saddled her.

Sometimes we worked in the arena. Sometimes we headed straight for the trails.

I began taking trail lessons from an instructor because I wanted to become more competent. I wasn't trying to become a competitive rider. I wanted to know what to do if Demi became nervous, if the terrain became difficult, or if something unexpected happened away from the barn.

Mostly, I wanted to become a rider Demi could trust.

Until around noon, the rest of my life could wait.

None of this seemed extraordinary at the time. That's one of the strange things about happiness. Sometimes you don't recognize it while you're living it.

I wasn't trying to turn Demi into anything. She wasn't taking me anywhere important.

I had a horse to go see in the morning.

For a while, that was enough.

The stable was its own little world. There were dressage riders and jumpers, western riders and serious horse people who knew far more than I did. There were arenas, a round pen, wash areas, tack rooms, buckets, brushes, manure forks, trailers, dogs, conversations, and all the ordinary activity of barn life.

But what I loved most was beyond the stable.

The hills. The trails. The creek. The levee. Neighboring stables.

On clear days, the world opened around us. The ocean was off toward the west and the rolling hills stretched in the other direction.

Up in the hills was a Boy Scout flagpole. Nearby was a mailbox where riders could leave notes. Sometimes that was our destination.

Demi and I would climb the hill, reach the flagpole, check the mailbox and eventually turn toward home.

Other days we stopped at the creek. In winter, when there was more water, Demi seemed to enjoy being there.

Sometimes we rode with company. Sometimes we rode alone. I liked both.

There didn't always have to be a destination. We could ride to the flagpole because we felt like riding to the flagpole. We could stop at the creek. We could visit a neighboring stable. We could turn around and go home.

I wasn't training for anything. Demi wasn't being prepared for anything.

We were simply having a life together.



The trails beyond Tar Farms Stable.

Chapter Three

Learning Demi

Demi was patient.

That did not mean she was passive.

She had experience in western schooling and performance and knew far more about being ridden than I knew about riding her. She could be sassy. She had preferences. She didn't always appreciate an unfamiliar horse getting ahead of her. Occasionally she tested whether I was paying attention.

I never thought of her as mean.

She was simply herself.

She was patient enough to let me learn and opinionated enough to make sure I did.

One day we were out on the trail when Demi stopped.

I asked her forward.

She didn't move.

I asked again.

Still nothing.

Then I saw it.

A rattlesnake, coiled in our path.

Demi had noticed it before I did.

I had been sitting above her believing I possessed the larger picture.

I didn't.

That stayed with me.

Years later, when a horse resisted something and the immediate human response was to make the horse comply, I would sometimes remember Demi standing on that trail.

What if the horse who refuses to move knows something you don't?

There was another place near the creek where Demi sometimes changed. She became more alert. Sometimes jiggy. Her attention moved away from me and toward the surrounding brush.

Later I learned that mountain lions moved through that country. I don't know whether there was a mountain lion nearby on any particular ride. I don't need to know.

The important thing was that Demi experienced that trail differently from me.

I saw where we were going. She could hear what I couldn't hear, smell what I couldn't smell, and notice movement I might never see.

The rattlesnake had already taught me not to dismiss that.

And then there were the quieter things.

Demi learned my car. I could arrive at the stable and hear her nicker. She knew I was there.

Sometimes I barely needed the lead rope. She would walk beside me.

Those moments remain as vivid as any trail ride.

Demi beside me. Chuck nearby. A barn morning beginning.

Our relationship was built there. Not through one dramatic breakthrough. Through hundreds of ordinary moments.

There is a difference between controlling where an animal goes and realizing the animal has chosen to stay with you.

Demi was not legally mine.

And she was completely my horse.

One morning, the woman who had first told me about equine massage saw Demi and recognized her.

That was when I learned that she had once owned Demi.

The connection surprised me. The woman who had listened to me talk about wanting to learn equine massage—the woman who had put the Equinology curriculum into my hands—had once owned the horse I was now riding almost every morning.

Demi had gone from one woman to another, and eventually her reins had been put into my hands. Separately, the possibility of equine bodywork had also been placed in front of me.

Looking backward, the connection seems almost too perfect.

At the time, I wasn't thinking about destiny. I wasn't thinking about a future career.

I was riding Demi.

Chapter Four

When Something Changed

By the time I began paying closer attention to changes in Demi's movement, I had already been riding her for a couple of years.

We knew Demi was susceptible to laminitis, and we were managing it.

What changed was how closely I watched.

By then I knew the rhythm of her walk beneath me. I knew how she normally moved on the trail. I knew her habits. I knew her moods.

Gradually, I began noticing things.



Demi during our Tar Farms Stable years.

A head bob. Tripping. Subtle changes in the rhythm of her movement. Small signs that told me she wasn't completely comfortable.

I didn't have the education then that I have now. I couldn't explain exactly what was happening.

I simply knew something was different.

Sometimes I got off. Sometimes we walked. Sometimes we did groundwork. Sometimes there was no ride.

It wasn't a dramatic decision where one day I suddenly stopped riding Demi forever. It happened gradually.

Demi didn't have to carry me for our time together to matter.

I wasn't developing a philosophy.

I was paying attention to a horse I loved.

Demi was attached to her stablemate. When that horse was moved, Demi became distressed.

Then she tied up during the night.

Her owner was away and called me. Demi's former owner came too. A veterinarian treated Demi with fluids and medication, and she recovered.

I remember being struck by what had happened. A change in her world had affected her profoundly.

She had relationships. She experienced separation. Her emotional and physical well-being were not neatly divided.

I didn't yet have sophisticated language for any of that.

Mostly, I was relieved she was okay.

Not long after I had begun paying closer attention to Demi's discomfort, she was taken on a full-moon ride.

Something went wrong.

Horse and rider went down into a ravine.

The rider was bruised.

Demi was injured.

I was furious.

My anger came from fear and from how deeply I cared about Demi. But caring deeply does not make every reaction right.

I crossed a line.

The friendship was strained.

For a long time, memory compressed what happened afterward. It could feel as though the accident happened and Demi immediately disappeared from my life.

That isn't what happened.

There was still quite some time before we finally parted.

Eventually, however, Demi was retired to pasture in Central California. She would remain there for roughly a year or two.

And the horse who had been part of nearly every morning was gone from my daily life.

Chapter Five

The Empty Place

The absence of Demi was enormous.

No drive to the stable. No grooming. No trail. No flagpole. No familiar nicker when I pulled in.

Then Chuck died.

He had been woven into that entire part of my life.

The car. The barn. The mornings. The trails.

Now Demi was gone from my days and Chuck was gone completely.

For a while, I couldn't be around horses.

It hurt too much.

Then, only days after Chuck died, a puppy appeared.

Layla seemed to come out of nowhere. She was a young black Lab-Golden Retriever mix, energetic and capable of creating chaos almost immediately.

She didn't replace Chuck. She wasn't supposed to.

She simply arrived when grief had made my world very small.

And she gave me something living to care about.



Layla, as a puppy.

Eventually, a friend invited me to walk again in the hills where Demi and I had once ridden. She brought her horse. I brought Layla. I wasn't trying to reclaim my old life. I was simply walking through familiar country, letting myself return one step at a time.

Then my friend told me something I hadn't expected.

Demi was back.

She was at a local equestrian center.

I wasn't sure I wanted to see her.

But I went.

Chapter Six

Finding Demi Again

I searched the property.

I looked into stalls.

One after another.

Where was she?

Then I found her. Demi. Thin. Lame. Her left front wrapped. Still herself, and yet changed enough that for a moment I had to let my eyes catch up with my heart.

I was told she had developed ringbone in her left front pastern.



Demi when I found her again.

The hope was that the arthritic joint in her left front pastern would eventually fuse on its own, reducing the painful motion in that area.

So they were waiting.

I remembered the horse moving beneath me through the hills.

The flagpole. The creek. Her ears ahead of me on the trail.

Now she was standing in a stall. But she was still Demi. And after all that time, I had found her.

Years earlier, Chuck had ridden with me to the stable when I went to see her.

Now Chuck was gone.

Layla was with me.

So much had changed.

Demi had changed too.

But I had found her.

Finding Demi did not mean getting our old life back. I wasn't going to saddle her and head toward the hills. She needed something completely different from me now.

For months, the hope remained that the arthritic joint would fuse naturally.

There was waiting. Stall rest. Watching. Veterinary care. Uncertainty.

There were moments when Demi remained down for hours and there was nothing I could do except wait.

That helplessness was difficult.

I was a massage therapist. I was accustomed to using my hands. Hands could soothe. Hands could work. Hands could make me feel as though I was doing something.

But there are times when loving an animal brings you directly to the limits of what your hands can accomplish.

I began asking a different question.

Not, How do I get my horse back?

But:

How can I help the horse who is here now?

Chapter Seven

While We Waited

Only about four months after I found Demi again, I lost Layla.

During those months, Layla went through three stomach surgeries. The first crisis had begun with her dangerous habit of eating socks. Her intestinal problems became a terrible cycle of surgery, recovery, and another crisis.

Three surgeries in four months.

Eventually, I had to make the painful decision to put her down.

Layla had appeared in my life only days after Chuck died. She had been the dog beside me when I finally returned to the old hills. She was with me when I found Demi again.

And then she was gone, leaving another empty place beside the one Chuck had left and just as Demi was beginning to need me in a new way.

Demi was still here, standing at the beginning of a long and uncertain medical journey of her own.

There was no tidy lesson in any of it.

There was simply grief, and a horse I loved who still needed care.

About six months after Layla died, a little red Queensland heeler came to the stables needing a new home.

Her name was Zoe.

According to some of the boarders, Zoe picked me.



Zoe.

I hadn't gone looking for her. She simply appeared.

It had happened before. After Chuck died, Layla had shown up out of the blue. Now, after losing Layla, here was Zoe.

I have always believed Demi sent her.

I can't prove that.

I don't need to.

It's simply what I believe.

Zoe did not erase the loss of Layla any more than Layla had erased the loss of Chuck.

She was Zoe.

And somehow she became part of the life that was continuing around Demi.

But Demi's story wasn't over.

Some of the most important years of our relationship were still ahead of us.

Chapter Eight

For One Horse

For several months, the hope had been that the arthritic joint in Demi's left front pastern would eventually fuse on its own, reducing the painful motion in that area.

It did not.

Eventually, surgery became the next choice.

Money had to be raised.

I started a GoFundMe.

Friends helped.

People showed up for Demi.

But there were still things none of us could control.

So I went to the basilica and asked Father Michael if he would come pray over Demi.

He came to her stall and blessed her.

I have a photograph of him kneeling near her.

That mattered to me then.

It still does.



Father Michael blessing Demi before surgery.

In the days after the blessing and before the surgery, I continued visiting Demi. Her left front was heavily supported and protected.

Sometimes she stood.

Sometimes she lay down.

The horse who had once carried me through miles of open country was living within the boundaries of a stall.

Around that time, I photographed the full moon.

Years earlier, a full-moon ride had marked a painful turning point in Demi's story. Now another full moon hung above us only days before surgery, quiet and impossible for me not to notice.

I don't need to give that any meaning beyond what it had for me.

I noticed it.

And I remembered.

Then came the surgery.

A plate was placed to support and stabilize the affected area in her left front pastern.

When I went to see her at the hospital, the veterinarian told me that two women who had cared for Demi in previous chapters of her life

had each already been there earlier that day, at different times, to visit her.

I wasn't standing there with the two of them.

But hearing that they had both come meant something to me.

One had once owned Demi. The other had cared for her and eventually put her reins into my hands. And now each of us had made our way back to her.

Three women from different chapters of one horse's life had each found their way back to her.

Separately.

On the same day.

Surgery was not the end of Demi's story.

It was the beginning of recovery.

Years earlier, information about equine massage had been put into my hands and I had hesitated.

Now I wasn't wondering what I might someday do with the training.

I knew why I wanted it.

I wanted to understand more.

How horses used their bodies. What I could safely touch. What I should leave alone. How I might support Demi without imposing my desire to make her better.

I enrolled in equine massage training at Equissage.

Not because I had developed a business plan.

Not because I wanted another credential.

I went to school for Demi.

Chapter Nine

Walking Beside Her

Demi's recovery was slow.

For the first few months there was more stall rest.

Then came the hand walking.

Small walks.

A few careful steps.

A little farther.

Another day.

Another walk.

There was nothing dramatic about most of it.

That was the work.

I watched where she placed her foot, how she shifted her weight, how she stood when we stopped, whether she seemed tired, and whether today looked different from yesterday.

Years earlier, Demi and I had ridden through the hills with places to go.

Now walking itself was the accomplishment.

I had spent those earlier years learning to ride Demi.

Now I was learning to walk beside her.



Walking beside Demi during rehabilitation. Photo by John Tobias.

The slower pace changed me.

When you ride a horse for miles, it is easy to think about destinations.

When you walk beside an injured horse, a few steps can become the destination.

Weeks became months.

Months became a year.

Eventually Demi could be turned out into a round pen.

Her world became larger.

She could move, have space, and begin to be a horse again in a larger world.

And from there, another life began opening.

I wasn't learning only in classes and workshops.

Demi was teaching me too.

When I put my hands on her, I began noticing small things.

A change in breathing. A shift of weight. Stillness. Turning away or leaning toward me.

What happened when I stopped doing something.

What happened when I waited.

The more techniques I learned, the more important another lesson became:

Touch is an offer.

The horse gets to decide.

Chapter Ten

Demi's Second Life

At around a year after surgery, Demi's world had expanded considerably.

She had progressed from stall rest to hand walking to turnout. She could be around other horses again. She could move through a larger space. She could participate in ordinary barn life.

The medical part of her story explains what happened to her body. The rehabilitation explains how carefully her world had to reopen.

But the reason for all of it was much simpler.

She got to be a horse again.



Demi back in a larger world.

Eventually, Demi began participating in therapy sessions in the arena alongside other horses.



Demi participating in therapy sessions.

The horse who had once carried me through the hills had found another way to be with people.

She didn't have to travel miles. She didn't have to compete. She didn't have to prove what her body could do.

Sometimes she approached. Sometimes she stood back.

She could make choices.

She could be part of what was happening without being forced into a role.

Her value was not measured by how much she did, or by what her body could still give to people.

This is the part of Demi's story I don't want to lose beneath the surgery.

Demi lived approximately four more years after her recovery—not merely surviving, but returning to the ordinary dignity of being a horse.

There were other horses, turnout, therapy sessions, grooming, and ordinary barn days.

Because Demi was never simply an injured horse.

She was a mare.

A horse with preferences and moods and relationships.

A horse who had once carried me.

A horse who later needed me to walk beside her.



Demi in the years after her recovery.

When I worked with her body, my training gave me language for things I had noticed but couldn't yet name during our earlier years.

Muscles. Attachments. Movement. Restriction. Compensation. Acupressure points. Lymphatic pathways.

But Demi kept bringing me back to something simpler.

I watched her breathing, her ears, her eyes, a shift of weight, a lowered head, stillness, turning away, and leaning toward me.

Sometimes she seemed to invite more.

Sometimes she was finished.

Touch became less about what I could do and more about what happened between us.

Touch.

Wait.

Watch.

Respond.

Looking backward, Demi had been communicating with me from the beginning.

The rattlesnake, the creek, her movement, stress, soreness, and choices had been language all along.

She hadn't suddenly learned to speak.

I had become better at listening.

Chapter Eleven

What She Taught Me

Demi kept teaching me.

Other horses followed. Some welcomed touch. Some needed space. Some were aging. Some carried old injuries or compensation.

Each one required me to begin again—not with what I thought I knew, but with the horse in front of me.

Later, I gave her name to the work I do with horses, not because the work was the story, but because Demi was.

It was not the point of her story. It was one way I carried her with me.

Before the techniques. Before the credentials. Before any idea that I might someday call myself an equine bodyworker, there was Demi.

Demi's later years also changed my understanding of what a successful outcome could be.

Success did not mean returning her to the horse she had been in our earlier years. The goal was not to make her young again or put me back in the saddle. It was to support the life she had now.

Learning more can create its own temptation: one more technique, one more approach, one more thing to fix.

Demi taught me otherwise.

There are limits to our hands.

And sometimes the measure of success is very simple.

A horse who had once stood lame in a stall still had a life to live.

That was not a small thing.

Chapter Twelve

The Empty Stall

Eventually, Demi died.

I could try to create the perfect final scene here.

I don't want to.

Her life deserves the truth more than it needs a beautiful ending.

There would be no more rehabilitation.

No next treatment.

No new technique.

Nothing left for my hands to fix.

Only grief.

And gratitude.

When I think about losing Demi, I also remember everything that came before: the strawberry roan mare at the stable, Chuck nearby, the trails, the flagpole, the creek, the rattlesnake, her nicker when I arrived, finding her again, and those first small walks.

Most of all, I remember seeing her world open one last time.

I don't need to improve that story.

We lived it.

What remained after Demi was not only memory. It was the fact of having loved her, and of having been changed by that love.



Epilogue

The Door She Left Open

For years, I tried to understand why Demi mattered so much.

I don't think I need to anymore.

Long before her name belonged anywhere else, it belonged to the mare who taught me the joy of having a horse to go see in the morning.

I went to the stable thinking I had been given a horse to ride.

Instead, I was given Demi.

I know her name.

Demi.

And all these years later, what I remember most is not the path she opened, but Demi herself.



About the Author

Karen Katzmark wrote this memoir about Demi, the strawberry roan mare whose presence shaped how she understands care, touch, listening, and devotion.

Karen is a massage therapist, educator, and equine bodyworker who later created **Demi Equine Bodywork** in Demi's honor.

DEMI: The Horse Who Changed Everything is, above all, the story of Demi.