

Be Careful What You Wish For

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By Veni Harlan

Several years ago, on a beautiful Sunday morning, I decided to treat myself to an apple fritter from Sarah Lee's. I recall the small shop, crowded with people perched on stools, reading their papers intently as tho every item held great importance. I didn't care much about the daily news but since I was alone, and didn't want to just sit there stuffing myself with sugar and coffee, I picked up a paper and began thumbing through it. Just the usual boring stuff I thought to myself as I dropped pieces of glaze on world events. Then I spied a small square ad in the classifieds. "AUCTION. By order of U.S. Bankruptcy Court for the Western District of Louisiana." Below, in tiny type was a listing for real estate, farm equipment, and seven Arabian horses. That got my attention! Arabians, I sighed out loud. I poured over the few details and tore the ad out carefully.

I have had many breeds of horses since I was five but Arabians always held a special fascination. The very word, "Arabian," conjured up a world of romantic images. As a child, I was captured by the tales of Marguerite Henry's, "King of the Wind," and the lavish illustrations of Wesley Dennis. The classic Polly Knoll photograph of the grey desert stallion, Morafic, with his luminous eyes and chiseled head, hung on my bedroom door. It was the sheer beauty of Arabians that inspired me to draw and paint what my heart longed for, a



Chance, Veni, and nephew Chuck Harlan in the saddle, accepting a ribbon in their 2nd IAHA Leadline class in Gonzales, Louisiana.

Godolphin Arabian of my own. Realizing the dream of riding as Agba did on his Arab steed seemed completely out of reach due to the inflated prices of the time. But it was a good dream.

The morning I found the ad happened to be a bright blue day. A day perfect for a country drive, so I set out to see the auction horses and satisfy my curiosity. Five unkept Arabs of various ages were shuffled out for viewing in a dusty paddock, among them, a mouse-colored, leggy colt. He wouldn't come near but I was inexplicably drawn to him. Young and underweight, he had fire and literally floated from rail to rail. I sighed thinking how wonderful it would be to have a colt like this but that surely he would go for more than I could afford. The barn owner kept directing me to "better" horses. Horses that were trained and quiet and well, less dusty. I just kept looking over my shoulder at the grey colt the barn manager described as ugly.

All during the week I thought about the shy colt. So much so, that I just had to see what would become of him. The following Saturday, I drove to the law office of Thistlethwaite & Pavy in Opelousas where the auction was to take place. Picking up the sale list, I was encouraged to sign up for a bidding number. "But I'm not here to bid." I told the woman. "Well, you never know" she replied. "Doesn't cost you to take a number." And so I did. A handful of people gathered in the parking lot. I listened intently as each horse was sold for prices that seemed amazingly low. Then at last, the unnamed grey colt came up. A man standing next to me raised the first bid. He was a gruff old fellow with a voice that made me jump. The bid was a mere \$150. Unthinking, I timidly lifted my number. "\$200!" The man bid again. My heart raced, my hand shook, and suddenly my number flew into the air. The man didn't bid again. "SOLD!" Oh my heavens. I had just won the colt for \$275! Breathless, I contemplated what had just occurred. I could hardly believe it. A simple chain of events and an apple fritter had lead me to my first purebred Arabian.

On the way home I kept thinking of the old Johnny Mathis tune, "Chances Are." I decided it was an apt name for my new colt. That was March 31st 1990. It took three men to put the colt in the trailer and months before he would let me touch him without flinching. I had never seen an animal so afraid. Little by little, touch by touch, we became friends.

Chance turned out to be the most marvelous horse I have ever owned, with more talent, spunk, and personality than most people on their best day. After some research, I discovered he was the product of some very nice breeding that included many national and international champions. I also learned that his breeder was Ken Guilbeaux, former owner of Lafayette based, KEG Arabians, and that Chance was a combination of Russian, Crabbet, and Polish bloodlines. Like hundreds of other lovely Arabians, when the bubble burst, they were thrown on the market for a fraction of their former value. None of this really mattered. He was a treasure all by himself.

With the help of friends Leslie Fulkersun and Anne Hornbeak, we dipped our toes and hooves into the show ring with some success and lots of fun. Chance was a Regional Top 5 hunter pleasure/Amateur Owner/Rider champion, an International Arabian Horse Association regional reserve champion at dressage training level, and garnered many first place ribbons in all-breed dressage competition achieving a United States Dressage Federation performance certificate, American Horse Show Association regional top-five dressage training level award, and the IAHA *Legion of Honor* designation. Chance has also been the patient teacher of my nephew and niece, carrying them gently in leadline classes. Best of all, Chance is my beloved friend, who has literally and figuratively, supported me through the twists and turns on the trail of life. Few things lift my spirit more than the sound of his nicker greeting.

Fate (and apple fritters) were kind that long ago blue morning to send me such a special horse.