

Sage

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A short story about the miraculous survival of a draft horse/thoroughbred gelding named Sage.

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Sage

Since his birth, Sage had lived in a rectangular holding pen, the last in a line of five, all connected together to create something like outdoor stalls.

Sage was built like his Percheron sire, growing to stand a mighty seventeen hands by the time he was a full grown four-year-old. His coat was a handsome smoky black with a white stripe running down from his forehead to his nose. He was never sold as a foal, yearling, or colt. The reason being Sage was not gelded until his seventh year after siring a beautiful gray dappled filly who sold at eighteen months old.

After one year as a gelding, a woman and her daughter finally came around to this section of five pens. Sage was alone, save for two miniature pony colts.

The daughter was by the name of Montana Lawson. She was fourteen years old with long raven-colored hair, simplistic features, and the gentlest demeanor. Montana had been riding horses for ten years at her grandpa's until her parents' divorce. Now she and her mother lived on a two-acre property that included a quaint two-stall barn and pasture. The two were now ready to buy a horse.

Montana approached Sage slowly, keeping her body relaxed. The black gelding pricked his ears toward her, dipping his muzzle down to meet her extended palm. Montana smiled, stroking Sage's great head and muscular neck.

Sage was sold that day for the cheap price of six hundred dollars. He had only one year of under saddle training. Sage was quiet and willing though, always happy to please a rider.

The following afternoon, Sage was loaded up into the Lawson trailer. A short drive later, he was led into the little farm's pasture. He was put into his stall each night and fed there too. His new family gave the horse three days to settle in, then it was time to saddle up for Montana's first ride in a lesson taught by her own mother.

The big black gelding stood silently while his owner brushed him, picked his feet, correctly placed the saddle, secured the girth, and finally bridled. Montana led Sage out into the smooth pasture. With her mother's help Montana mounted up. Gathering the reins, she squeezed Sage into a marching walk.

Riding from then on was nearly perfect. Sage did not always know what was being asked of him, but in time he learned. Montana came out every day to groom and feed her best friend. Even if she didn't have time to ride, she loved free lunging Sage or sitting on him bareback and petting him while he grazed.

Montana and Sage were almost inseparable for the next three years. A bond was formed, trust coursing through the horse-and-rider relationship.

On the evening of July first, Montana was mounting up for a bareback ride through the nearby trails. Waving goodbye to her mother, all she had to do now was tell her gelding to walk and he moved forward. The pair set out for a fun ride, planning to arrive home within the next hour.

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“Alright boy, let’s trot.” One ear flicked back at the sound of Montana’s voice which was followed by a light squeeze. Sage seemed to nod his head as he picked up the familiar two-beat gait.

For the biggest part of the trail Sage trotted easily, more than happy to carry Montana anywhere she wanted. The warm summer air was relaxing. Birds chirped, squirrels played about in the trees. Only for the first half of the trail though. Montana then began to notice how eerily mute her surroundings became.

“Whoa Sage.” She said, pulling back slightly on the reins. Looking around, she made sure the path was correct. Underneath her Sage shifted his weight, growing a degree nervous. Everything looked normal though. So Montana rubbed her horse’s neck and sent him forward.

The quiet continued, not a single sound for a good ten minutes. Suddenly a piercing *boom* rang out. Sage felt Montana jump as she wasn’t expecting a gunshot to go off. This worried her gelding but he just flickered his ears, knowing his rider would not put him in danger.

Montana began to turn Sage around and canter off for home. Her plans were destroyed when a large gray wolf burst through the trees behind the gelding and girl. It stood ridged on the trail, ears flat back with teeth bared. A horrible snarl escaped its lips, aimed toward the huge horse and rider. Terror ripped through Montana. She fought to keep calm but she couldn’t stop her rapid heartbeat. Sage had skirted sideways, the white of his eyes displaying his fear.

Another shot fired, just barely nicking the wolf. It wasted not another second, charging toward Sage. He screamed, turning forward as he reared up. Galloping ahead, he caught a glance behind him to ensure Montana had stayed on. Luckily she had and was now bent close to her black horse’s neck, gripping tight with her legs. Behind, the wolf could be heard following. Not to attack, but to get away from its hunter.

Soon enough, the wolf was at Sage’s heels, desperate to save itself. *Pow, pow, pow!* Three gunshots. There was a yelp. There was a fearful scream. And Montana found herself crashing down to the earth. Sage’s entire side slammed down onto Montana’s leg, the bone immediately breaking under such impact.

The seventeen-year-old girl let out a blood-curdling cry of pain. Tears built up in her eyes. Sage was breathing hard, nostrils flaring. A few feet back, the wolf was lying motionless. For a second Montana was still then realized her horse has fallen. Sitting up, she ran her hands from his neck on down. She felt something moist and sticky followed by her eyes spotting her black gelding’s wound.

Sage had been shot in his shoulder. The bullet was protruding from his flesh with crimson blood oozing out. Sage didn’t panic. Instead he lay calmly on the ground. He knew what had happened. He knew thrashing would not help.

Montana blinked hard though she couldn’t fight the hot tears that flooded down her cheeks. “Oh God please no! Not Sage, please not Sage!” she wailed into the sky.

The horse raised his head, nuzzling Montana gently with his nose before letting his head fall again.

Taking a ragged breath, Montana sat up as high as she could. She knew she had to get Sage off her leg so she could get help. Another breath and Montana tried to push Sage’s barrel up. “Câmon boy, you have to get up for me. Up Sage! I know it hurts, but you gotta stand so I can help you.” Montana spoke quietly, giving her gelding’s stomach another shove.

He understood, and so he tried. Throwing forward his neck, Sage pulled himself up, barely able to stand long enough for Montana to scramble back. He collapsed just in time for his rider to move away. Crawling toward

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his head, Montana leaned against Sage's upper neck. Digging into her pocket, she was relieved to find her cell phone. Mrs. Lawson answered on the first ring.

"Hey sweetie is everything okay?" she replied, not too concerned. Her daughter had only been out for about thirty-five minutes.

"I don't know why but there was someone in the woods and they shot at a wolf! Sage ran! Wolf died and Sage was shot! He's hurt real bad mama!" Montana tried her best to get all the word out through sniffling hiccups.

Mrs. Lawson gasped, "Oh God, Montana are you alright baby? Oh dear gosh, okay I'll be there with a vet. Just stay right where you are. You hear me? Don't move!" The frantic mother hung up, leaving Montana curled against her horse praying for help to come before it was too late.

The hour passed, sun was setting low. Sage had slowed in breathing. Montana tried to stop the bleeding with her coat, but did not dare mess with the bullet. It wasn't until after a few stars had appeared that a truck came rushing down the path. It screeched to a stop as close as possible to Sage and Montana.

Mrs. Lawson jumped from the passenger side, helping her daughter up as the vet shut the driver's door. Turning on a flashlight, he came to kneel by the shotgun injury.

"Easy now boy, I'm gonna take this pain away," the vet soothed. He had seen the wound and was now carefully wedging out the bullet. He was forced to move slowly as not to make the bleeding start up again. Sage didn't make a sound though his pain was obvious.

Dr. Alistair got the bullet out after a few more seconds. Setting it aside, he went to inspect and clean the gash. With his evaluation over, he stood up with heart wrenching news. "First I do want you both to know how sorry I am. This should never have happened. Sage is badly hurt. The shot punctured through to his muscle tissue. I don't know if he'll be able to stand. Certainly can't leave him out here. So, I highly suggest we put him to sleep."

Montana exploded in tears, sobbing into her mother's shoulder. Mrs. Lawson gave her child a tight squeeze, trying her best to console Montana.

"Is there nothing more we can do?" Mrs. Lawson asked the vet.

The doctor sighed, running a hand through his blond hair. "No," he shook his head, hating to state such truth.

"No! I am not giving up on him!" Montana shouted, jerking out of her mother's arms. Scavenging though the veterinarian's truck, she found stitching equipment, gauze, and medical tape.

Ignoring both the adults, she knelt down by Sage. The nicker he greeted her with was strained. Blinking back tears, Montana began stitching. She remembered watching as a human doctor performed such a task on her mother's forehead. Bringing back that memory, she easily sewed up her smoky gelding's injury. After, she padded the completed stitching with gauze, finally wrapping the medical tape down around the upper leg and back up to the gauze patch. She was able to make this circle twice before sealing the tape down.

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For the rest of the night, Montana camped out beside Sage. His breathing overnight became slower until Montana couldn't hear it anymore. She dreamed the horse would die overnight like Dr. Alistair had predicted. She told herself not to listen, but in the end she knew Sage's chances were very low. Montana did not expect to wake up to a living horse.

Through the summer night I fought. The agony was unimaginable. I could not, would not, leave my sweet filly alone. So I forced my body to continue battling against death as its nasty blackness surged from my wound.

Above me I watched the stars fade, the sky lighten. By the time dawn was peeking through the forest trees, I knew life had won the war. My shoulder ached with soreness, but otherwise no pain had survived. Next came the final test: rising to my hooves.

Focusing most of my strength towards my legs and back, I moved my body forward from the earth a few times for momentum. Finally, I leaned forward with all I had, gathering my weight back onto my hooves to stand. At first I had to balance myself on three feet. Then gradually, in time to the sky lightening from gray to pink to blue, I placed all my body onto four hooves.

I could just see the sunshine above the trees when my young filly awoke. Rubbing her eyes, she looked towards me. Looking into her gaze, I watched as her emotions flashed by. Those water drops spilled from her joyful eyes. She wrapped her arms soft around my neck, burying her tender face into my mane. My filly spoke to me in her language and though I did not comprehend, I knew she was grateful that I stood here now.

Sage recovered within the next year. His walk was permanently damaged. He would never gallop again. He could carry a rider no faster than a trot. Montana didn't care though. She savored every moment she could have with Sage.

The pair went on to compete in one season of flat classes where the big smoky black thoroughbred and Belgian draft horse cross dominated. He and Montana ended their first showing season with over thirty first place ribbons, three champions, one reserve, and six second place.

Sage lived on until the age of fourteen when he suddenly lay down in his stall and died. The date was December twenty-fourth at 11:04am. His cause of death was never known. Sage was buried on New Year's Day right outside the Lawson's two-stall barn. Sage's story of miraculous survival forever lives on in the hearts and spirits of all who know the tale.

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