

Love AT FIRST SIGHT

While looking for a Thoroughbred to heal her broken heart, Christina happened upon a Standardbred that immediately called to her.

BY CHRISTINA BEYER

Sometimes the universe sends you what you need.

I'd lost Emmy, a magnificent, kind, motherly Thoroughbred mare, after her battle with a degenerative soft tissue disease. She was a horse that knows your thoughts before they've even made it to words; the kind of horse they don't make anymore.

HOLLYWOOD MOMENT

Our tale begins after months of horse shopping. My husband's draft horse was depressed and needed a friend. Every horse we looked at—all Thoroughbreds—wasn't The One. And maybe I wasn't ready. Then one day, after looking at the New Vocations site, I happened to stop upon pictures of Utopia. But the listing said ... "Standardbred."

Standardbred? What the heck do I know about them? But his face, and his eyes, and his proud yet kind energy pulled at me. I

happened to be traveling for work to Lexington, Ky., the very next day, and their Richwood, Ohio, facility was basically on the way. I contacted Bridget Hollern, their Standardbred trainer, and she said I could come meet him.

Upon arriving at the farm, I wasn't really expecting much. I had already pooh-poohed every horse we'd gone to look at for months. Like most potential adopters, I gave Bridget a little summary on our horse history and how hard it was to lose a horse like Emmy.

We walked into the barn, and like a Hollywood cliché,

I locked eyes with Utopia. It was love at first sight. He had a presence of intelligence and humor. He found a pack of Twizzlers candy in my pocket and demanded to eat every single one of them.

Bridget and I worked with Utopia in the cross-ties and I asked if I could longe him. I got the butterflies back and was smiling from ear to ear. After working Utopia and watching Bridget ride him, I was sold.

That night at the hotel room in Lexington, I called my husband.

"What do I do? He's a Standardbred, and I wanted a Thoroughbred again."

My husband said, "Well, do you like him?"

I replied, "Yes, yes, yes! Let's get him."

So, a week later, we picked up Utopia from Bridget's barn and brought him home.

ALLERGY ATTACK

The butterflies and joy faded as the first week went on and we started noticing that Utopia, now known as Twizzler, had developed hives all over his body and face. We went on an eight-week crusade to figure out what he was allergic to.

We changed everything you can think of: bedding, hay and feed, baths, allergy meds, even vet-prescribed meds and allergy testing. This poor horse was exploding in his stall as we tried to keep him off the pasture for fear the pasture was causing the allergies.

I was devastated and scared. Our trial was almost up, but I didn't want to give up on him.

I called Bridget for advice; we even got her vet involved. My vet returned to us with the blood-based allergy testing results: Poor Twizzler was allergic to many things in horse feed, some insects, and a whole lot of pasture plants, including clover. All of the pastures in northeast Ohio are dominated by clover.

Out of pure desperation, I talked to my husband about ripping out the pasture and starting over with a grass mix he could live in.

I was eventually put in contact with Twizzler's former trainer/owner from his race-track days, Terry Deters. Terry is a horseman through and through. He is kind and honest, and he was happy to talk about his beloved Utopia, who apparently had always suffered from hives, and had lived comfortably with blood serum allergy treatments.

Hallelujah! We didn't have to dig up the pastures and he could eat and live like a normal horse! We started the shots as soon as they came in. It was a relief for Twizzler within the first few weeks.

TRIKE TRIALS

The day I knew this hive-stricken horse had to stay with our family was when Twizzler was standing in the cross-ties watching our 2-year-old son Glenn ride his tricycle around in the barn. Glenn knows very little about horses, but he knows how Emmy was with him—kind and aware. Glenn assumes all horses are cool with noisy, tiny people riding about.

I watched Glenn almost ride his trike into Twizzler's front feet and stop. In slow motion, I thought to myself, OK, *he's either going to spook or run over Glenn.*

Nope. Twizzler, as levelheaded and intelligent as he is, pushed Glenn's bike with his nose, and Glenn giggled with glee that he was moving backwards. This game continued on and on.

PROBLEM SOLVING

Eventually, we started Twizzler under saddle at our farm. We ride in our pastures and fields; we don't have an arena. It never occurred to me that a Standardbred might not understand that his new job doesn't have a track to guide him, and the aids are very different from being driven.

I struggled a bit getting him to understand what I was asking him to do. Something that helped us was creating a large circle out of cones, a bit like a track.

The other thing I struggled with was bit selection. It seemed we tried at least 30; all of them resulted in the same thing—a lot of anxious chewing and chomping.



CAPTURE YOUR HAPPY PHOTOGRAPHY

Our now dear friend Terry reminded me that they race with very simple single-jointed snaffles with fixed mouthpieces. So I put back all the \$200 bits and went out and bought a \$20 copper roller snaffle driving bit. We now ride comfortably (although somewhat chompy at the beginning of the ride).

A VERY SPECIAL JOB

A few short months after letting Twizzler into our hearts and home, he embarked on a huge job.

Before Emmy's passing, she was a friend and a teacher to a 7-year-old family member named Rhys, a boy with Asperger's syndrome (a form of autism spectrum disorder). I was confident Twizzler would be kind and patient with Rhys, too, and we decided to give it a try.

Twizzler never put a foot wrong under saddle. He seemed to have the same ability to read the situation that Emmy did. Rhys loves having Twizzler as his new teacher and friend, and Twizzler loves being the center of attention, especially with children and the snacks they often have.

A BREED WITH A LOT TO OFFER

I tell everyone I know looking for a new riding horse to consider a Standardbred. They are level-headed, first and foremost. They are funny and great family horses. They are athletes and love to work. They are extremely trainable, forgiving, and can settle into new situations quickly. Twizzler is also pretty darn sound, even after over 200 races!

We were a family of broken hearts, and the universe sent us Utopia. Our hearts are full and our home is complete. ■

Twizzler didn't mind at all when Christina's 2-year-old son, Glenn, rode around the stable on his tricycle.



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