

Davy – An Unexpected Love Story

Love comes in many ways and often unexpected.

Being from the Netherlands, I did not expect to meet a Norwegian guy– let alone that I would move to Norway to be with him.

And being a 'warmblood person', I did not expect to meet a thin grey Arab on the other side of the world – let alone that he would end up in Norway, too.

This is a little part of the story of Da Vinci, the grey Arab who has changed my world in so many ways.

The Millennium Change

Is there any better way to start the new millennium than a whole new life...? You'll never know unless you try! Which is why at the end of 1999 I quit my job as a communication manager at Volvo in the Netherlands, said goodbye to my family and friends, packed my dog and two cats in the car and drove to Norway to start life with my Norwegian boyfriend. My warmblood mare would stay with friends in Belgium until I could find a good place for her in Norway.

I learned Norwegian and eventually found a job as a riding instructor. And just when everything seemed to be settling down nicely again, my boyfriend was offered a job in the USA. We decided to take the opportunity – even if it meant we had to get married in a hurry!

A Different World

Being married meant I would get a visa to go with him, but with that type of visa I would not be allowed to work in the USA. We found a nice house in Mission Viejo, California and I spent the first few months of our stay more or less shopping continuously. However, even shopping gets boring - I had to find something to keep myself occupied.

I really missed being around horses and I started looking for a riding stable. I drove around for hours, taking lessons and looking at stables, but I soon found out that things are very different in the USA. I had hoped I could maybe find a horse to ride for somebody or to share. No such luck. Since many trainers in the USA make a lot of money riding horses for clients, they were not exactly happy with somebody who offered to do the same thing for free. And lessons were very expensive. Buying a horse would be very expensive.

Keeping a horse, however, was relatively cheap. And there are many rescue organizations in the USA that try to find new homes for horses. So that became the plan: get a horse via one of those organizations, rehabilitate it, and then sell it to a good home when we would go back to Europe. I decided I did not want an ex-racehorse, because they often have such bad injuries, and not an Arab. And certainly not a grey horse!

Rodeo Horse..?

I visited several organizations and finally ended up with one called TIER (<http://www.tierrescue.org/>). There are several 'feedlots' in California where horses are collected and fattened up before they are shipped for slaughter. The lady who runs TIER would visit those feedlots and take pictures of horses that maybe could be saved. I looked at the pictures on the Internet several times and there was one that caught my eye every time.... Yep, a grey Arab! I had some long discussions with my husband and with myself and finally told them that I would take the horse, but that TIER would have to take him over if he would be too badly injured.

At TIER they told me he most likely had been used in Charro rodeos. First I got really worried since I thought they meant as a 'bucking horse'. But this turned out to be something totally different. In the Southwest of the USA so-called charro rodeos are organized. One of the events there is 'horse tripping'. Which means that they take a horse, make it run (using electric prods if necessary), and then lasso it down. The harder the fall, the more points and applause... They especially like to use 'hot' horses like Arabs. The horses are often rented from the feedlots; the ones that are too damaged in the rodeo go on to the slaughterhouses, the other ones go back to the rodeo the next weekend. Of

course many horses are horribly damaged, breaking necks, backs and legs, and sometimes trying to climb over walls just to get out of there. Is it illegal? Yes. Does it continue? Yes.

(If you want to read more: <http://www.idausa.org/facts/horsetripping.html>

<http://www.atourhands.com/horses.html> or <http://www.fund4horses.org/info.php?id=100>)

Da Vinci

It was a thin, frightened and worried horse that came off the trailer. Some strips of skin still torn off of him, a big rope burn on one leg, and a very sore left hind leg. He obviously was not trained in any way as a riding horse; not used to being led, not used to being tied up, not used to being brushed or having his feet picked, and scared of almost everything. I put him in the middle of a huge corral so he could run and he would just stand there, frozen. Obviously he associated running around with being lasso'd down. And, understandably, he was terrified of getting a rope or a lunge line around his legs.

So, we took it very slowly and started by finding a name for him. Nothing seemed to fit until we one evening were watching CNN and saw a newsclip on the opening of a new foot bridge in Norway, close to where we had been living. The bridge was constructed after drawings by Leonardo Da Vinci. Now we had our name. The grey horse was christened Da Vinci (Davy for everyday use), in the hope that he would turn out to be a genius, too!

'There are no good farriers!!'

But even a genius has to start with small steps. We took a lot of time getting to know each other and getting Davy just used to everything. I had his leg checked out by a vet who also did chiropractic treatments, and that really helped. After that I could finally teach him to lift his legs and get him used to his feet being picked out. (If you want to read more about these early days, please visit <http://www.tierrescue.org/David.htm>)

Davy was barefoot and his feet seemed OK to me. I asked a local farrier to trim them a bit, but I was not really happy with his work. One day I asked a friendly woman at the stable if she knew any really good farriers. I never expected her answer: 'There are no good farriers!!'

And then she told me about barefoot horses and the Strasser Method and that I should get in touch with James and Yvonne Welz at The Horse's Hoof. (<http://thehorseshoof.com/>)

I checked out the website and everything just made so much sense. Then I gave Yvonne a call and she told me James would be coming to California just a few days later – and that he would be willing to trim my horse, but I would have to read Dr Strasser's books first! Phew. That was the first time a farrier actually asked me to do such a thing. But, it also made sense. So I begged and borrowed the books from somebody and a few days later James came to do the first trim.

Finding The Answers

Reading the Strasser books ('A Lifetime of Soundness' & 'Shoeing, A Necessary Evil?') opened a whole new world for me. In the Netherlands I had been involved in breeding and training horses, and one of the main concerns was always: will they stay sound? My old mare had been diagnosed with navicular syndrome many years ago. I still remember the uncertainty, the many questions, and how little help there seemed to be. Her daughter (the horse that still was in Belgium) had always suffered from horrible hoof cracks and was more or less retired at a very young age because of that. Now I finally found answers! And again, finally everything made sense.

Hard To Accept

Davy was barefoot when we got him and his feet did not seem to have too many problems. But I soon learned that the trim is only half of what is needed. The other half – maybe even more important – are the living conditions a horse needs to stay healthy. Living outside year round, with other horses... This turned out to be the most difficult thing to realize. Property is extremely

expensive in Southern California, and the only 'herd living' I could find close to where we lived was a group of starved horses behind barbed wire on a lot where the only things growing were from the cactus family. Not what I wanted for Davy, so he had to stay in his very small paddock. Luckily the surface was fairly hard most of the year, which at least helped a bit. But it made me feel really frustrated the whole time, to know what he really needed and not being able to offer it. There were weeks when I actually thought it would be better to just find him another home. There was another thing that was hard to accept when I learned about the Strasser method. When I realized the damage that shoes and incorrect living conditions can do, I also realized that I had harmed the horses that I had before Davy. I had done everything with the best of intentions and with all the knowledge I could find at that time – but I had done the wrong things. And my horses had suffered because of that.

A Real Bucking Horse?

Well, I promised myself not to make that mistake again... but of course there are always other mistakes to make! Davy was doing well and I had finally begun to ride him around a bit. I used a saddle that fit him reasonably well. He was getting calmer and gaining some weight. However, after a few weeks he started getting a bit nervous every time I tried to get on him. I figured out he just needed a bit more training. Then, one day, as soon as I lowered my butt in the saddle, he took off and gave some huge bucks. I was totally unprepared, flew off and landed flat on my face. Luckily I was wearing a helmet (which cracked, by the way), but I ended up with a chin that was disconnected from my chinbone, a visit to the hospital, lots of stitches and a major headache.

The next day I went back to the stable and found a really upset horse. Maybe he had done this before and been punished for it? Or, maybe he was a real bucking horse?

After spending some hours thinking over this I finally realized what the problem was. The saddle that fit well when he came did not fit anymore since he was gaining weight and muscle. With my weight on top it was getting more and more painful for him to be ridden. He had been trying to tell me that for a long time, but I was too ignorant to listen to him.

Explosive

It took some time before I started riding him again - first I had to buy a new saddle! After that things went a lot smoother. Being used as a tripping horse is of course not the best preparation for a career under saddle. Davy needed to be built up slowly, and to relax mentally. He also got regular chiropractic treatments and cranial sacral work. He really started to become a nice little horse, fun to ride and very balanced and responsive.

However, he could still be very explosive. Getting into a panic when tied up, or performing impressive series of bucks, rears and caprioles when turned out or on the lunge line, or getting totally spooked by a leaf on the ground. Maybe this was the reason he ended up on his way to the slaughter house at such a young age? Had somebody tried to train him and failed because of his temperament? His reflexes certainly felt a lot quicker than mine! I had to keep him on a diet of basically just hay. And I only rode him in the arena or around the stable area, never 'outside'. I just didn't dare to.

Life is what happens...

In the meantime I learned more and more about barefoot and about the Strasser method. I also realized that there are not so many people in the world that are properly trained to do this. How could I keep my horses healthy in the future? I grudgingly realized that I would have to learn how to do this myself. And learn it well. Which meant, taking the full education to become a Strasser Hoofcare Professional. And since I was not allowed to work anyway, these years in the USA might be a good time to start.

So I started. Wasn't it John Lennon who said that life is what happens while you're making other plans? Life happened to me. Just after our first SHP-training I found out I was pregnant!

Unfortunately in my case morning sickness was all-day sickness, and didn't last three months but around nine. Which meant that I had to stop trimming (since that is hard to do when bending over makes you throw up). Luckily James Welz was nice enough to keep on trimming Davy's feet.

Back To Europe

Soon after our daughter, Maxine, was born, my husband was offered a tempting job in Norway. We decided to move back, but of course there was one huge question: what should we do with Davy? Taking him with us would be very expensive, and how would he deal with the quarantine?

But finding a new home for him in the USA was more difficult than I had expected. Because of his old injuries he would always need careful training and regular 'treatments' (such as chiropractic) to keep in good shape. The best kind of training for him is good, old-fashioned classical dressage, so he builds up the correct musculature and gets stronger in his back. This means he needs a good and sympathetic rider – but those are not so easy to find. And people who really are interested in dressage usually want a warmblood, not a smaller Arab with a shady past, a volatile temperament and old injuries. People who are specifically interested in Arabs usually don't want one without papers. And on top of that I wanted to be sure that he would be kept barefoot.

I realized that there was another dimension to this question. Most important: what did Davy want...? We asked several 'horse communicators' to ask him his opinion, and the answer was clear every time: he wanted to come with us! And so it was decided.

The Da Vinci Bridge

We delivered a shiny well-muscled horse to the quarantine facility in the USA, and some months later a very thin horse with muscles only in the wrong places arrived in Norway. I had tried to explain to him what would happen, but the first time I saw him again I almost could read his mind like a neon-sign over his head: 'You didn't tell me it would be like THIS!' But how can you explain quarantine and an airplane transport to a horse? At least he seemed really happy to see us again. We had bought a house in Ås, a small town in Norway which is home to the agricultural university. I had found a nice stable for Davy which was not very far away. And amazingly enough it was very close to the Da Vinci bridge that had given him his name in the first place.

Atomic

Davy was not so happy with the way he was stabled – outside in a paddock during the day, inside in a box stall during the night. He got very upset every time a horse went out, tramping down everything in his stable and knocking pieces of skin off everywhere. Luckily we were offered an opportunity at the same stable for him to be out in the field the whole winter with a group of foals. That worked much better, even though he still was 'hot' every now and then. Once that winter he spent two days in a box stall and immediately went from hot to atomic. No fun at all.

I was a bit worried how an Arab from California would adapt to living outside in Norway. But that turned out to be no problem at all! Even after riding him I would just turn him out with his group and he would roll and maybe stand in the shelter if it was very windy. He had absolutely no problems with the cold and the transition to such a different climate.

However, something else was starting to be a problem, namely his feet. My knowledge of correct trimming was still very limited and I did not really manage to do the right things.

Luckily the summer of 2005 brought help. A very kind SHP (Anne Aamodt from Molde) came and trimmed him a few times, and I found out that it would be possible for me to continue my education to become a Strasser Hoofcare Professional in Sweden!

Muddy Paddock

This meant life was getting really busy now with a small child, a horse, a house and a heavy studyload. Davy was spending the winter outside again. Unfortunately we had a very wet autumn – which meant a very deep and muddy paddock. I soon found out that that was a big problem. Davy's

feet went from bad to worse and he actually started getting sore, which had never happened before. After the wet autumn we had a very long and cold winter. The muddy paddock froze in sheets of ice and sharp ridges. Davy was already sore and this made it impossible for him to move. If you want a barefoot horse you can use, enough movement is one of the most important factors – hard enough terrain is another one. I would have to do something or I could forget about riding him again.

Home!

Unfortunately at the stable where he was there was no possibility to improve the surface. This meant I would have to move him – but where? I investigated several other stables, all much further away. But then there came a solution from a very unexpected source: our neighbours! The house we bought is next to a farm. The family who owns the farm has several horses and they had been thinking for a long time to 'go professional'. They had even applied for permission to build an indoor riding arena with 30 stables. Therefore they were quite happy when they found out that I am a certified riding instructor and in training to be a hoofcare specialist. They asked if I could trim their horses but I had to answer them: no, not as long as you keep them in a stable! Of course this answer deserved some explanation. Many hours were spent talking about what kind of living conditions horses actually need, and why barefoot is better. The result was that all their horses were 'kicked out' of their stables – and that Davy moved home!

Behaviour Change

Since the old stable was just a few kilometers away I decided it would be easiest to just walk him over. Which is what we did, in february 2006, in the middle of a snowstorm and on roads covered with ice. Davy had no problem at all to keep upright, but I had! He liked life in his new group straightaway. And of course it is great to have him literally just a few meters away. From our house we can see a large part of the paddock, which is probably every horse owner's dream.

I am learning more and more about trimming and his feet have improved a lot. He had horrible hoof cracks when he came home and was sore on hard surfaces for some time. However, now he happily walks over big sharp unsteady rocks!

Even more amazing than the change in his feet is the change in his behaviour. He gets as much hay or silage as he wants and a good portion of oats every day. He is happy to work but much, much more relaxed. I have even started riding around the neighborhood; over highway bridges with traffic zooming under us, past kids jumping on a trampoline, through lonely forest tracks... He still thinks that cows are possibly very dangerous and he got very confused by a man in an electric wheelchair, but his spooks are a whole lot less spooky than they used to be! Since we have lots of roads with gravel here I have bought some boots for when we go out, which works fine.

He is so well-behaved that he is allowed to graze on our home lawn every now and then. This is of course great fun when we have guests with children. He is amazingly patient with them, especially with our daughter Maxine. She is now three years old and does all the things you should NOT do with a horse: walk under him, poke him with a brush, pull his tail... She will try to lead him and he will carefully adapt his speed to hers and not even stray when tempted by some juicy grass. Of course he is still a horse so we keep a close eye on them. Even a three-year old can learn some good manners around horses. But at least we now have some ideas for Christmas presents for Maxine: a riding helmet, a small saddle...

Better Than Dreams

Sometimes reality is even better than your dreams. Our neighbors realized their horses are a lot happier and a lot healthier now (barefoot and living outside) than when they were shod and stabled.

Therefore they are no longer planning to build a traditional riding-arena-with-stables. Instead they are setting up a natural boarding place for barefoot horses! We will have very nice facilities, with a big outdoor riding arena and a round pen, the possibility to groom and saddle your horse indoors, several outdoor shelters, large fields, terrains adapted for barefoot horses... I feel amazingly lucky to have all of this almost literally on my doorstep. One of my wishes and hopes is that this facility will also function as a showcase for the terrific benefits of the Strasser method. We hope to be 'open for business' in the autumn/winter of 2006, and we already have had quite a few people asking for information. It will be fun to get a few more horses to trim and maybe I can even do some teaching again.

A Teacher In So Many Ways

One of my other wishes is that Davy will have many happy years here, and that he will continue to do what he seems to do very well: namely, teaching people about horses. Looking back over the past few years I realize that the 'horse that I never really wanted' has become a teacher for me in so many ways...

The Strasser trim, for example. Since he is the first horse I trimmed and the one I have trimmed the most, of course he is also the one where I made the most mistakes. Taking away too much, taking away too little... Davy quickly managed to sort that out. When his feet need to be done he will happily allow me to trim. When I'm tempted to do too much he will just pull his foot away – or refuse to be caught. (Which is funny afterwards but not while you are actually running around trying to catch him!)

Through the 'saddle incident' Davy taught me that it was high time to start LISTENING to horses. And to take what they are saying very seriously (especially if you don't want to get hurt). Maybe there should be training courses in horse listening instead of horse whispering.....

The enormous difference in Davy's behaviour when stabled or when outside has made me think about some uncomfortable ethical questions.

Why do we still think it is perfectly acceptable to keep horses in stables? (A dog is usually not kept in a small cage most of the day.)

Why do we just accept that the way we keep and use horses very often destroys their health? (Such as racing two year old horses – or putting shoes on at any age.)

Why is it acceptable that another living creature has to suffer just so we humans can have some fun, or can satisfy our ego by winning yet another coloured ribbon?

Do we want to do things with a horse – or TOGETHER with a horse?

But maybe the most important of all things Davy has taught me is how amazing and wonderful it is to have a horse as your friend. Some people say he has been lucky, but in my heart I know that I have been the lucky one.