

Personal Essay – 700 words

## BEST OF FRIENDS

by W A Stewart

I remember the first time I saw Nassau. He was standing in a *crowd* of about thirty others. I knew the way we know some things without explanation: we would be best friends. I foolishly tacked on the expletive *forever* as if I had control of such things.

He was tall for his age. He held his head erect as if he knew he was special. I approached him slowly, my hand out as an offering, cooing his name. He put his nose in my hand. Then I buried my face into his baby mane and I knew he was the one for me, that there'd never be another horse like him.

I grew up on a large beef farm in northwestern Ontario. We had five hundred acres carved out of the wilderness by hopeful farmers years before my father placed all his hopes on the piece of land that would claim most of his money and chew up his dreams and spit them back out. My siblings and I had horses. We rode from dawn to dusk, galloping with our bare legs on smooth sweaty coats with no saddle to cling to, just our wits and our balance.

It wasn't until I was thirty that I got to imagine my own set of dreams. It was upon Nassau's back that I hoisted my big plans and on whose ears I heaved my joys and torments. He never once complained. If the burden was too great, he never let on. That's the thing about best friends, they accept it all: the good, the bad and even the ugly, to borrow a phrase.

I've not been good at long-term relationships. I'd apologize, but then I'd want to explain and what's the point in that now. Nassau has been my long-term fella. He knew when I swung up on his back with ease that we would gallop, the wind lifting my hair. I balanced on his back in perfect rhythm with his strides; we were one.

I used to climb on Nassau's back and stretch out on my equine-hammock. With a blade of grass in my mouth I would recount to him my writing ideas, as he strolled and grazed. Sometimes he swung his head around and nibbled on the toe of my shoe that rested near his shoulder. He sneezed to clear out his nostrils and swished his tail to rid his body of flies, both real and fictitious. And all the while I balanced and snoozed, planned and dreamed. Those were the moments I called my own.

For twenty-five years I loved Nassau and he me. We both aged. Nassau became white with large black expressive eyes. His once look-at-me way of moving shifted into a weary trudge and his thin body struggled with the by-product of a pituitary disorder.

It was time. But I wasn't ready. I wasn't ready to let go of the child that lived in me because of him. I wasn't ready to let go the grip on my history, the part of me that was just me.

Kindness shows itself in places where we seldom expect it. The backhoe operator came at a moment's notice and quietly and respectfully dug and moved the soil to leave a space large enough to place my friend in. He didn't say much, just went about his job and then sat still, his head bowed, waiting for the signal to gently push Nassau's body deep into the ground and to cover him.

The vet's eyes were brimming and leaking, but his hand, though shaking, was gentle. Nassau sensed something, perhaps the hole or the smell of medicines or my tears. He hesitated, just enough before my voice steadied him, before the automatic trust kicked in.

The vet administered the sedative and Nassau buckled his knees and slumped on to his side as if he had become fluid. I stroked his face and he closed his eyes. His body shuddered. He exhaled a couple of times and his lips pulled back from his teeth. Then he was still.

My friend was gone and I, the one left behind, had no idea in that moment who I really was without him.