

DAVE BARRY

Ungrateful Equines

MIAMI — Recently, a woman I know named Michelle came into the newspaper office with a big ugly wound on her upper arm. Realizing that she might be self-conscious about it, I said: "Michelle, what's that big ugly wound on your upper arm?" Sensitivity is the cornerstone of journalism.

It turned out that Michelle had been bitten by a horse. It was her own horse, and it bit her while she was trying to feed it. This is a typical horse maneuver. Horses are the opposite of dogs, gratitude-wise. You give a dog something totally wretched to eat, such as a toad part or a wad of pre-chewed Dentyne, and the dog will henceforth view you as the Supreme Being. It will gaze on you for hours with rapt adoration and lick the ground you walk on and try to kill the pizza-delivery person if he comes anywhere near you. Whereas if you spend hours grooming a horse and lugging its food and water around, the horse will be thinking: "Should I chomp on this person's arm? Or should I merely blow a couple gallons of horse snot into this person's hair?"

I don't trust horses. "Never trust an animal with feet made from the same material as bowling balls" is one of my mottoes. I never believed those scenes in Western movies when bad guys would tie the hero up, and his horse would trot over and untie the knots with its teeth. A real horse would size up the situation and stomp on the hero's feet.

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I don't blame horses for being hostile. I myself would feel hostile toward somebody who was always sitting on me and yanking on my lips. But what I don't get is, how come they're so popular? Especially with women?

Now you're probably saying: "Dave, you're just bitter because in fifth grade you had an intense crush on Susan Cartoun and you wrote 'Sue' on your notebook inside a heart, but the name inside the heart on her notebook was 'Frosty,' an imaginary horse that she loved much more than you."

Yes, it's true that I am a little bitter about that. Also I have not forgotten my first experience with a horse. I was 9 years old, at a farm, and I attempted to ride a pony. Following my sister's directions, I put my foot into the metal thing hanging down from the pony (tech-

nically, the "fetlock"), and instantly the pony, not wishing to be boarded at that time, trotted briskly off, with my leg attached to it. I attempted to keep up by bouncing next to it on my other leg, like the famous Western cinematic star Hopalong Dork, but finally, in a feat of astonishing equestrian skill, I fell down backward and got dragged across the field with my head bouncing gaily behind.

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So I stayed off horses altogether until 20 years later, when I was courting my wife. We were in the Rockies, and they had rental horses, and she wanted to ride one. Naturally she loves horses. As a child, she used to ride a neighbor's horse bareback, an experience she remembers fondly even though she admits the horse would regularly try to decapitate her by running under low tree branches at 27 miles per hour. I don't want to sound like a broken record here, but why is it that a woman will forgive homicidal behavior in a horse yet be highly critical of a man for leaving the toilet seat up?

Anyway, I was in Raging Hormone Courting Mode, meaning I would have wrestled a giant snake to impress my wife-to-be, so I let her talk me into getting on this rental horse. It turned its head around and looked at me with one of those horse eyeballs the size of a mature grapefruit, and I knew instantly what it was thinking. It was thinking: "Hey! It's Hopalong Dork!" So while my wife's horse trotted briskly off into the scenery, looking for low branches to run under, my horse just stood there eating, waiting for me to put one leg on the ground so it could suddenly take off and drag me to Oregon. So I sat very still, like one of those statue generals, only more rigid. I'd say we moved about 11 feet in two hours. Next time I am definitely renting the snake.

Fortunately, my wife's horse was unable to kill her, and we got married and lived happily ever after, except that she keeps saying that she wants us to go riding again. I don't know what to do. I think maybe tonight I'll fix her a candlelight dinner, give her some wine and put on some soft, romantic music. Then, when the moment is just right, I will gently but firmly bite her upper arm.

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