

# When we must say goodbye



The hardest thing for any horse, or pet owner, to do is know when it is time to let their animal die with dignity. We don't always have a choice. Even so, it can be very difficult to know when enough is enough. When we take on the responsibility of looking after an animal we must also take on the responsibility for allowing them to leave this world with as little suffering as possible.

On Monday 30 March 1998, I rode Bruja for the last time. I took the day off work and came up to the yard in the early afternoon. I brought her in and spent time grooming her and fussing over her. I brought out my Western tack and she nosed it sighing. I had noticed recently when she came in she would search the door for the saddle. If there was no saddle, she brightened up knowing she would have no work. I tacked her up and planned my route. I was running out of light so I chose a shorter route that took 30 min and gave us the opportunity to sneak into a field for a quick gallop.

We walked down the hill towards the field. I felt her jog on as she approached the gate, willing to take me in and go for a run. A voice in my head said "Don't do it!". I gently pulled her up and turned her around.

"It's OK. We'll gallop another day."

As we went back to the yard I put her on a grass verge and let her canter. I let her choose her pace and felt her try to run, but no power was in those great muscles. Her strong sure legs were failing her. I pulled her up and walked her home.

On the Tuesday it was her day off and a friend looked after her, bringing her in and feeding her. On the Wednesday a young girl who was learning to ride on her came up for her usual lesson. I brought Bruja in from the field and took off her rugs. I gasped in shock at what I saw. The young girl, who hadn't seen Bruja for a month exclaimed in surprise. This powerful friend was fading. The strong muscles of her quarters were wasting away. I ran my hand over her ribs and felt the flesh thin, barely disguising the bones. I called my friend over.

"Look at this." I said. her expression said it all. She was as experienced as me and could recognise as I could that this was serious. Bruja was fading fast. We put her into her bed and again she wouldn't eat her feed. I took the young girl home and only when she left the car did I break down in tears. I knew this chapter in my life was racing to a close.

On Thursday I put Bruja out in a small lush paddock. I hoped against hope if I could only get her to eat, she would recover her strength. I left her extra hay and feeding as I walked away.

That night I brought her in and I couldn't see any difference in her weight. On Friday, I put her out in the paddock again. I was up a little later than expected that night and my friend had already brought her in, rugged and fed her. She looked so contented munching her hay, I didn't have the heart to disturb her.

On Saturday 4 April 1998 I went up early to make sure she was OK. I mucked her out and took off her rugs to put on her outdoor New Zealand. As the rugs came off I dropped them to the floor, my poor beautiful Bruja was fading to a skeleton. Her body weight must have halved in these few short days. I had already checked her feed manger and noted that her evening feed had not been touched. She hadn't drunk any water and her hay was barely disturbed. Her tail was clean of shavings so she hadn't laid down that night at all. Her legs were swollen from standing all night.

"It's OK my baby girl, it's OK" I patted her neck and she watched me with dull, sad eyes. I put her stable rug back on and went home knowing that now I had to be strong for her, for my friend.

As soon as I called the vet we went back up to the yard to wait. As we all stood in her stable waiting for the vet it was the hardest thing in the world for me to do to keep calm. I didn't want to cry, I didn't want to upset Bruja. She mustn't suspect anything. I was stupid to think Bruja didn't know what was going on.

The vet arrived, she examined Bruja carefully and thoroughly. She suspected as I did that Bruja had liver failure, a common complaint in old horses. She knew as I did that by the time any blood tests came back from the lab the horse would be dead.

She finally spoke: "She has a very bad heart murmur, her circulation is bad and her lungs are filling with fluid, that's why she won't lie down. It is not treatable and will not get better."

She looked me straight in the eye as she said this – it was my decision. It surprised me how easy it was to say those fateful words: "Do it now".

This was my friend and she was in pain and suffering. Every time Bruja had been in pain in her life she knew it would be me who would take the pain away. She knew I would help her.

We led her quietly round to the indoor school and closed the door. Bruja stood quietly as we took off the headcollar and I held her with a rope round her neck. As the injection went in I talked to her all the time. I didn't cry, I didn't sound upset, I wouldn't do it, I wanted my voice telling her how good she was to be the last thing she heard. As the injection took effect she staggered.

"Let her go said the Vet". I let the rope slip away from her neck as she went down, a mild look of surprise on her face. Usually when they go down a horse will struggle in panic. As soon as she hit the ground I ran to her side,

"Be careful..." the vet started to say, expecting Bruja to struggle. But I wouldn't let my friend panic, I wouldn't let her last moments be filled with fear and confusion. As soon as my hand touched her neck she looked at me with blurry eyes.

"It's OK my baby girl, it's OK. Lie still hen, good girly." I felt her relax, I felt the fight leave her as she gratefully gave in to the anaesthetic. I watched my friend die. I talked to her constantly till I saw the spirit of fire that was her leave her eyes. I waited till she was gone before I expressed my grief.

I heard the vet say "That's her gone," before I let go. I remember standing up and turning away, I dropped the rope and sobbed as I felt her leave this world.

I hoped it would be a long long time before I would ever have to do anything like that again or make any such huge decisions but it was not to be. Seven years later, I took on another horse and became a two-horse owner. I took in a Warmblood mare who had ongoing problems and issues stemming from a leg fracture that should have healed perfectly well, but through one thing or another it required a plate to go in which became infected. Armani had been struggling with this problem for two years until her owners were advised to refer her to me.



Armani came to me for rehabilitation and she was initially very lame. After 8 months of intensive aftercare treatment she not only became sound, but when her leg was X-rayed again the wound showed very little or no infection. Armani went from strength to strength, regaining her muscle structure and starting serious work. Her owners who sold her to me as she was, seemed happy with her here, but they knew she would never be strong enough to jump again.

Everything was looking great for her and she regained her full bloom, starting canter work and moving well. We even competed in a showing class coming fourth. Not bad for a horse who was crippled just a few short months ago. She overcame her fear of being out in a field and not only had horse friends, but also took on the responsibility of second-in-command from the lead mare and made sure she disciplined the babies of the herd and kept them in check. It was a great success story and

it all seemed to be going so well.

However, a year after coming sound things began to go wrong. She had a constant open wound on her leg to allow the infection from the plate to drain and it was through this that she took in another major infection. We struggled for 8 weeks with various types of antibiotics, even looking at removing the plate with a local anaesthetic (she had nearly died under a general anaesthetic for the first operation). She struggled gamely on, sometimes having good days when she could be ridden out in walk and sometimes having bad days where she would wander around the field making sure everyone was behaving themselves.

In April of this year I stood in her stable and talked to her, I made it clear that she must decide what to do, she must either fight this infection off and survive or make it clear to me that it was time to go. A few days later I was lecturing SSPCA students and looked out of the window to see Armani lie down in the field directly in my eye line.

She went down very heavily and I was concerned. We went out to introduce the horses to the students and as we walked towards her she groaned and lay flat out, obviously in discomfort. We tried to raise her and she made an effort but she just didn't have any power in her hindquarters. We tried to roll her over onto her good leg to see if that would help her get up but she just lay flat out and limp. It was clear to me that she had given up.

I called the vet from the field and said that we would have to put her down immediately, probably where she was lying. As soon as I hung up Armani gave one last effort and got to her feet, walking away from us virtually sound. It was as though she had been satisfied that I had made the right decision.

We caught her and stood with her waiting for the vet and he confirmed that enough was enough. We led her on her last walk up to a secluded part of the winter field out of the eyesight of the stabled horses and gave her a last feed. She stood quietly munching and listening to us tell her how good and brave she was. The vet gave her the injection as she finished her last mouthful and she very quickly fell to her knees and lay down.

She lay as Bruja had done without a struggle, glad at last to be free of pain. We sat with her talking and gently stroking her beautiful brave neck as she slipped away peacefully in the home she loved. I had only owned Armani for a year but I like to think she was happy and content. It didn't make it any easier

to make the decision, but having been through it all before with Bruja did make it easier for me to cope with Armani's death, in the knowledge that once again I had done the right thing.

In both these instances I had not much time to plan but had to decide on the spot what to do. One of my clients however, had the hardest decision of all, to plan the day and time she would put her old mare to sleep.



Tyler had come to us for her last few months. She suffered from arthritis, lymphangitis and moon blindness and her owner wanted her to spend her last few months in this world out in a field living a natural life. The old mare surprised us all by making an incredible recovery and with careful management over her moon blindness she stuck it out for an incredible two years. She looked a picture of health (due mainly to the massive amounts of feeding she was receiving to keep the weight on her) and was very

happy. Her owner knew how tough the old girl found the winters, suffering with arthritis, and was in a real moral dilemma.

Tyler had been on Bute for many years and was very, very stiff in the hind legs. She had built up a resistance to the Bute and we had gradually upped the dosage (on vet instructions) to four sachets a day. This was keeping her sound and pain free. Her owner knew she could not let her see another winter and so did the bravest thing I have ever witnessed, by booking the date for her horse to leave this world.

It was a beautiful autumn day, the sky clear blue, the sun unusually warm and a feeling of late summer in the air. Tyler had spent the night out in the field with her friends and came in with the herd as the vet arrived. She stood quietly in her stable and then was led to the quiet corner of the winter field for her last feed.

We had fed her special treats at this spot for over a week and she was happy and keen to get to the place where the yummy food was waiting. Her owner held her close as she shoved her nose into the delicious apples and carrots and once she was finished (and before the impatient old bat shoved us all out of the way and headed for the foot long grass!) The vet gave the injection.

She lay down slowly, gently rolling flat and quietly went to sleep. She lay with her ears forward and with such a look of utter contentment on her face I will never forget it. Her owner made the bravest decision of all. It is easy enough when your horse is dying or in pain to let them go, but to let your oldest friend go when they looked a picture of health must have been incredibly difficult.

Tyler's owner knew her horse looked so well simply due to the drugs and feeding leaving it any longer would mean her horse would suffer. Despite Tyler's appearance it was still time to let her go and her owner could do this at the best time. Tyler was out all summer with her friends, warm, content, happy and with no pain, with the last words of comfort from her human companion in her ears as her spirit left this world.

For those of you reading this article who are struggling with a difficult decision, I hope what I have shared helps. For those who are finding it difficult to make the decision, I will say this – you must take yourself out of the equation. This is about the animal, not you. You must put your emotions to one side and think only of the animal. They are your friends. They trust you to protect them, to heal them and to love them. You must do all of this, even to the point of letting them go.