

The Silent Language of Grief: Velvet's Profound Impact on a Community

In the quiet Sanctuary of Unbridled, where the whispers of the past mingle with the rustle of the present, the story of Velvet and her best friend, FiVe, unfolds—a narrative steeped in companionship, survival, loss, light, and the silent language of grief.



Freelance Writer Equine Journalism Article (print or online)

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"In this moment, the warmth and gratitude in Velvet's eyes tell a story beyond words—a sacred connection she treasured in her final chapter. This is what Unbridled love looks like."

~Susan Kayne

Velvet's tale began under the golden glow of a Louisiana sunrise. On April 5, 1994, she entered the world at Channon Farm near Doyline, Louisiana. A jet-black filly but for the bright white star on her tender face evoking the image of a comet blazing across the cosmos. Under the care of her *Breeder* Gillian Sale, she bounced and brimmed with grace and vigor. Her official name, Party Wife — was not born from whimsy but woven from her lineage, a blend of her sire Partez, a contender in the Kentucky Derby, and her dam Constant Wife by Semi-Pro.

Her racing career, all eight races confined to Louisiana in 1997, saw her best finish in fourth place during her debut. From her final race, until she resurfaced as #5401 in the grim confines of the Bowie Texas Livestock Lot in September 2021, her whereabouts went cold. There, her identity was exchanged for a barcoded number. She had been weighed and sorted for slaughter. Her once-valued life reduced to cents per pound. At 27, her body was worn, and her spirit fatigued.

The Bowie Lot, a place synonymous with loss, is where hope seems forgotten. Yet, in the depths of despair, #5401 found solace in a bond with #5400, an aged mare whose sight on her right side had gone dark. According to their listing, they had been used as broodmares, and dropped off together. Their silent pact of mutual support and understanding was the only comfort they had amidst the uncertainty.

Their pasts, once filled with use and purpose, were disregarded, their lives thrown away without a backward glance. The identity of those who discarded Velvet and FiVe into the slaughter yards remains unknown.

On September 28, 2021, as dawn broke, a new chapter began for the elderly mares. Unbridled secured their freedom, offering Sanctuary and a promise of a future filled with care and kindness. In the protection of Unbridled, #5401, was renamed Velvet, in keeping with the allure of her dark rich coat, and #5400 became known as FiVe, and to some Studio 54!

At Unbridled, Velvet and FiVe blossomed. Velvet relishing in the simple joys of neck, back, and belly scratches with a rubber curry brush. She'd wiggle her body to position her caregivers to just the right spots. Her gratitude was silent but profound, expressed through a smile and the light in her eyes. FiVe, stabled beside Velvet, the more reserved of the duo, likes her privacy. She expresses her most demonstrative self at feed time with squeaks and squeals of sheer delight!

At age 29, Velvet's wisdom was akin to that of a 95-year-old sage. Her teeth, worn by time, required special attention, yet her essence sparkled as vibrantly as ever. Soft grains, chopped hay, and shredded carrots brought her pleasure. At feed time, Velvet preferred her feed tub on the outside of her stall gate, this way she could keep an eye on happenings in the aisleway, and peek at her BFF FiVe noshing in her feed bucket in the adjoining stall.

As the eldest resident in Sanctuary, Velvet was honored with stall number one. She was the first to welcome visitors with curiosity and her nuzzles, and the last to bid them farewell. She listened patiently during Read to The Rescues, participated with enthusiasm in Canvas of Compassion, and graciously identified with the senior guests! Her presence brought countless hours of joy to students, visitors, volunteers, and all who took a few minutes to caress her silky soft coat.

In the fall of 2023, Velvet experienced a heartwarming milestone in her life at Unbridled. On her second *savaversary*, and for the first time, she became sponsored or virtually adopted, a selfless act of generosity and love bestowed upon her by Shari Benjamin Raymond, a patron with a heart full of compassion for the rescued horses at Unbridled. This act of kindness not only provided for Velvet's needs but also symbolized the deep connection and commitment our community has to the welfare and dignity of these noble creatures. Shari's sponsorship was a testament to the impact Velvet had made in our community, touching lives through her participation in academic, arts, and literacy programs, and leaving an indelible mark on the hearts of all who knew her.

Velvet cherished her stall, preferring its comfort unless the weather was perfect. On those days, she displayed the spirit of a wild child, her nearly three decades of life momentarily forgotten. Yet, when entrusted to a child, she transformed, embodying the gentleness and affection of a loyal companion. Her personality and sass made her unforgettable, a testament to her inimitable spirit.

As Velvet's days wove into the tapestry of Unbridled's Sanctuary, her presence became a lesson in living. Each nuzzle, each gentle gaze, spoke of the preciousness of the present, the beauty of connection, and the sanctity of life. Her bond with FiVe, was embraced in the micro-herd of DiDi, Zelda, and Ripple, a family of rescued senior mares united by the heart's shared language.

On December 12th, 2023, Velvet basked in a beautiful day outside. The sun, a gentle benediction, caressed her coat as she nibbled on alfalfa beside her friends. As evening approached, at 5PM, she entered her stall, fresh with a thick bed of new shavings, just the way she liked it. There, she faltered, her journey reaching its twilight. At 5:45PM, with Veterinary assistance she was laid to rest with dignity and grace. Given her age and otherwise excellent condition, the Veterinarians concurred the symptoms exhibited were consistent with a stroke.

As the sun set on Velvet's life, her body returned to the earth, and a pall of grief moved through her friends both horse and human. FiVe, experienced the loss deeply. In the days following Velvet's departure, FiVe's unique whinny echoed through the Sanctuary, a poignant call for her missing friend. It was a sound that spoke of loss, of searching, and of an unfillable void.

Yet, in this landscape of grief, the other herd members, most especially DiDi, became pillars of support. DiDi, sensing her grief, stepped in. In the wake of FiVe's sorrow, the herd gathered close offering themselves as a balm for her sadness; their mere presence was a testament to the unspoken understanding and shared empathy that exists within the complexities of equine bonds.

This story, while deeply personal to Velvet and FiVe, is also universal. It speaks to the broader question of how horses perceive and react to the loss of a companion. Veterinary behaviorist Gemma Pearson MRCVS acknowledges the challenge in studying such a sensitive subject but confirms the significance of the emotional impact on horses.

FiVe's grief is not just an emotional response but a fundamental need. After Velvet's passing, she was moved into Velvet's stall, providing her with a space to connect with her memories and come to terms with her loss in her own time and way. While grief is a journey of sorrow, it is also a testament to love, a universal language understood by all beings who have loved and lost.

In the Sanctuary, life continues. The horses graze, the leaves rustle, snow falls, and the memories of Velvet linger in the gentle breeze. FiVe, with the support of her herd, is gradually finding her way back to the present, carrying with her the indelible mark of a friendship that will forever be a part of her story.

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