

Author: Sarah Stewart

Address: 6392 SE 104<sup>th</sup> St.

Runnells, IA 50237

Title: Blue-Eyed Paint

## Blue-Eyed Paint

Written By: Sarah Stewart

“I wonder what she looks like?” I murmured excitedly.

“Tim said this mare was a Paint,” Mom cut into my daydream. “I just hope she doesn’t have blue eyes.”

“Me too. Blue eyes just look kind of strange on a horse.”

Tim was the man (a friend of a friend) who had found this horse for us. Being a man, he didn’t pay attention to the important things, like the mare’s color or name. He just told us that she was kid-safe, a great trail horse, and a little on the showy side: perfect for us.

My dad put on his turning signal and pulled off to the left, maneuvering our truck and a friend’s trailer into the driveway of a modest Southern Iowa farm. A small house was situated on our left, but I didn’t pay any attention to it. My eyes were drawn to the aged red barn on the right side of the drive. There were a few small pens puzzle-pieced around the barn, but they didn’t contain any horses. Standing in the doorway of the barn was a Pony of the Americas mare; adorable, but a little on the small side for me. Next to her was a smiling, waving woman holding the lead rope of a 15hh muscular mare. A Paint mare, the horse my family had hauled a trailer three hours for. A Paint with two blue eyes.

Mom and I exchanged a rueful smile. I remembered a saying I had seen on a horse T-shirt; it went something like, “There’s no bad color for a good horse.”

I supposed it applied to eyes as well.

I climbed out of the cramped truck cab and stretched. My three younger sisters piled out after me. The girls soon decided that the P.O.A. (named Molly) was the cutest thing they'd ever seen and that we should take her as well.

"We came for the Paint. Between her and the hay burner we have at home, we'll have plenty," was my father's final say on the matter.

The owners saddled the Paint up for me, and she stood like a champ while the man tacking her up tightened the girth. I rode the mare around, but wasn't quite sure about her. She didn't want to stray far from her best friend Molly, and this wasn't the perfect trial run I had been hoping for.

After making a quick call to Tim, who assured us that this was the animal we needed, we loaded our new friend into the trailer. She stepped right up and had no problem standing tied; I decided this was a good sign, because I had read about horses that weren't very cooperative when it came to trailers. Through the slats at the top of the trailer, I could see my new horse's face: all white with blue eyes. Her markings and eye color made her look as if she was constantly frightened.

The woman we were buying our new horse from signed the registration papers over to us. My family and I hopped back into the pickup and started out. After turning around and making sure our new passenger was all right, I studied her papers. The American Paint Horse Association listed the mare's registered name as, "A Fancy Splash." My family and I decided we would call her Splash.

After a long drive back to the Des Moines, Iowa area, we pulled into my grandparents' place. My grandma loved horses, and was very excited for us (and for

herself: she planned on coming to our house soon to try this mare out). Grandma wanted to see our new arrival, and Dad said it would be a good idea to stretch Splash's legs after standing in the trailer so long.

"Be careful," my dad warned in a low tone.

Dad knew that I wanted to take Splash out of the trailer by myself, but he didn't trust her quite yet. Dad opened the back door of the trailer and I stepped up into it slowly, where Splash could see me. She was tied in the very front of our borrowed trailer; I tugged on the quick release knot and then rotated Splash slowly in an 180 degree pivot. We had plenty of space in that trailer, and I thought it wise not to make her back out unless she had to, especially since this trailer had no ramp.

I was a little nervous about how Splash would do in this environment (my grandparents lived very close to a highway). However, I did volunteer at a Thoroughbred stable, so I was confident that I could handle her. I kept a close eye on Splash, but she was more interested in my grandfather's lush green lawn than she was in making a scene. I was proud of Splash for behaving so calmly, and for taking that whole crazy day in stride. Grandma thought she was a very pretty horse, and I was beginning to think so, too (even if she did have blue eyes). Splash loaded into the trailer again (just as easily as the first time, I might add) and we set off for home, which was right around the corner.

Dad backed the trailer up to the gate of a small paddock that Splash would have to herself. Our other equine, a Pinto pony named Dezi, came galloping to the fence nearest our new arrival with Breezy, a gaited bay mare I was borrowing for the county fair. I expected Splash to jog up and smell the interesting neighbors she was to have, but she

was more interested in the grass her pen had to offer.

Eventually, Splash ambled over to greet her new herd. Breezy didn't like Splash one bit, but Dezi took to her right away. Dezi had lived many years with only cows for company before my family brought her to our farm. Any female horses were welcome as far as she was concerned; male horses were another story. Dezi had had four foals in her lifetime, so any horse that was a boy, whether it be a gelding, stallion, or colt, was not tolerated. In fact, Dezi didn't like men either; my dad was the only man around our house, and he was more of a farmer anyway. Dezi was a good pony, but at 17 years of age, she knew what she liked, and she knew what she didn't like (consequently, everyone else knew it too).

My family and I soon headed back to my grandparents' house for fireworks since it was the Fourth of July. In between lighting sparklers, I worried that Splash would be scared from all of the noise and fire in the sky. I then remembered that I had been told Splash was deaf; I hoped that that would make her calm.

When we finally arrived back at my house, I shot out of the car and went straight to the fence. I peered over the top rail. Even though it was dark, I could see Splash because of her white markings. They glowed eerily, and so did our white fence. She lifted her pale face and stared at me for a moment, munching on a mouthful of grass nonchalantly. Those fireworks hadn't fazed her at all.

The next morning, Breezy's owner (a very nice woman named Joy) came to my house with her daughter. My sisters and I had tacked up the three horses, and Joy was going to take her daughter and I on a trail ride.

"Wow! Kind of freaky blue eyes, aren't they?" was Joy's reaction to first seeing my new ride.

Joy had her daughter take Breezy so she could practice bareback riding on a horse she knew. Dezi decided it was all right for Joy to ride her, and I mounted Splash. The road we were going to ride on had all manner of cars and trucks, two bridges to cross, some railroad tracks, and the occasional deer jumping out of the woods. I had been told that Splash was trail safe, but I was nervous about going on the ride because I hadn't had the opportunity to test this information.

As we rode out of the driveway, I thought to myself, *There's only one way to find out.*

We came to the first bridge, and Splash walked across it like it wasn't even there. I let out the breath I'd been holding and started to truly relax (not just a fake relax so I wouldn't make Splash jumpy).

The trio of horses continued making their way down the road. We eventually encountered our first car. Once again, I prepared for this unfamiliar mare to explode underneath of me. I let my right hand rest on her smooth neck, ready to calm her or grab hold of her wiry black mane if I needed to. The car approached, passed, and left completely. Splash didn't even flinch; she just kept walking, the epitome of a road safe horse.

*There's something to this blue eyed thing.* I thought happily, *Something special.*

Joy decided to take me on a four-wheeler trail that went off the road and into the woods. Getting to the trail involved going across a low area that had collected rainwater

(only a few inches deep, but muddy enough that you couldn't quite tell where the bottom was). Breezy and Dezi weren't too keen on going across that scary-looking water, so I steered Splash right up to the edge. She stopped short and stared at the water; I gave her a small tap of encouragement with my heels and then grabbed for the solidarity of my saddle's horn, hoping she wouldn't jump across the water. Splash calmly stepped in the water and moved on to the path, then stopped and waited for her friends to follow her example. I was so proud to be riding the, "good horse," the one we humans could count on when the rest of the horses forgot their training and needed a fellow equine to lead the way.

Joy and Dezi moved up to the front of our small procession since I had never been on this trail before. We started off winding our way through the woods, and then the trees cleared out to my right. Our group continued walking, hugging the edge of the tree line on the left. I glanced to the right and saw *nothing*. Only a few inches of soil separated Splash's right side from a drop off. I studied the slope in an odd sort of fascination, trying to calculate how far I would have to fall to hit the railroad tracks in the gorge below. I decided that The Man From Snowy River himself couldn't navigate that steep of a grade. This thought did nothing to comfort me, and my right stirrup swaying in midair gave me a sickening feeling. I sent up a quick prayer for safety and for the surefootedness of my mount, then concentrated on not doing anything that would cause Splash to miss a beat in her steady, rhythmic walk. My blue-eyed Paint brought me back home safely that day, and I truly began to trust her after that ride.

Now, over a year later, I couldn't be happier with my family's Fourth of July purchase.

Now, over a year later, I couldn't be happier with my family's Fourth of July purchase. Since that first trail ride, Splash and I have been through hundreds more, and even tackled showing a time or two. That mare will do anything I ask her to, and after so many rides, we know each other inside and out.

I can always trust Splash to keep me safe in dangerous or scary situations. Tim (the man who found her for us) said that before my family purchased her, he'd been on rides with Splash where she'd gone through things that (and I quote), "Would make a Billy goat sneeze."

Tim will always boast of how he's seen, "that Paint mare" go down slippery rock slopes, and hills so steep she almost sat down. His daughter has told me stories of using Splash as a diving board in rivers, and I know first-hand that Splash is as responsive to a halter and lead rope as she is to a full set of Western tack.

I've had a few people tell me Splash's eyes are kind of freaky looking. Then again, I've had more say that I have a gorgeous mare. That quote, "There's no bad color for a good horse," is absolutely true. Splash is the only horse I trust to take care of my youngest sister: that mare never lets me down. And when I'm asked to describe the horse that I talk about all the time, I always start out with, "She has blue eyes: like mine."