

Through the Eyes of Blue



by Catherine Matsalla

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Published in the United States by eBooks2go, Inc. 1827 Walden
Office Square, Suite 260, Schaumburg, IL 60173

ePUB ISBN: 978-1-5457-5387-3
Mobi ISBN: 978-1-5457-5388-0

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication

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Chapter 1

Parents

I realize now, if it weren't for my parents' divorce, they wouldn't have relented to the idea I get a dog as a companion. I was in those awful awkward preteen years and they worried I was becoming more of a loner than I had always been. I think it was really out of guilt for not spending adequate—for textbook human development—time with me back then. Quite frankly, I got used to being alone because I didn't have much of a choice. We had lived on a rented farm that boarded horses about five miles from the nearest town, and my mother hated to drive me anywhere there were other humans my age, and I was too embarrassed to invite friends over to our old worn and ugly farmhouse. I was fine with not having friends nearby to hang out with. It was not that I didn't like people. I did, and still do, of course. It was just a lot easier to be alone than to try to fit in. I simply preferred my own company to that of my classmates.

My parents were concerned I was being teased or bullied at school, but honestly, my school friends knew me as shy, quiet, smart Giselle, who could run forever. They were OK with that. I was OK with that. My parents were not. They were worriers. So they paid a shrink to psychoanalyze me. He told them I was completely normal and for them not to overanalyze things. He told me he thought I was surprisingly normal despite my parents. I took the opportunity to use my subliminal manipulation to impress upon the psychologist that he suggest to my parents they give me a dog as a way of trying to pull me out of my shell. It would be their idea. I had wanted a dog for so long, but they couldn't be bothered. They didn't have the time.

"Oh my God, this dude thinks I am a sociopath just because I like being alone," I had whined and threw up my arms in rebellion as I circled our

small farmhouse kitchen, playing the role with the flare of a turbulent, messed-up, lonely ten-year-old in need of a companion.

“Are you?” she had replied. That was my mom, Mariella Hill-D’Angelo, all in-your-face harshness packaged up in a beautiful body with all the best features from her father, an American Indian, and her mother, who was Irish until she died. Now I think, do we continue to be ourselves after we die? Does nationality matter when we become one with the earth?

My mom inherited the beautiful physical and the not so beautiful character traits from both races, and I won’t admit which is which. She had black horsetail thick hair, brilliant green eyes, strong bones, long legs, and slim hips. Yep, she pretty well had it all, including boobs, which I never got from the gene pool. She made all kinds of weird twists, poofs, and braids with her hair. Most of which had annoyed me. I again lost the gene pool with curly, unruly hair that always matted at the nape of my neck. To prevent spiders from nesting, as my mother put it, she would brush it so tightly into a ponytail that my eyebrows ended halfway up my forehead. She refused to let me cut it. She tried to convince me the reason the horses loved me so much was they thought I was one of them, except my tail was on my front end.

My mother was “full of piss and vinegar.” She took me through “hell and high water,” to quote my father when he was talking about the high-strung stallion we boarded at the farm. During most of my life, our house consisted of a tumultuous blend of “piss and vinegar” mixed with “psycho lonely girl”. I recognize now that I was a moody mosaic of Irish feistiness with a small amount of American Indian penchant for placidness, but it all came out through the mouth of an Italian mobster, while my mom was always experiencing some sort of premenstrual syndrome. Then there was the peacemaker, the Italian crooner, my father.

Frank D’Angelo. “Wit da apostrophe, do ya hear me? Wit da apostrophe,” he would yell into the phone when ordering something or when at the post office looking for a lost package. He looked like a street fighter off the docks of New York with a Dean Martin face. I think that was why he adored Dean Martin, because they looked so much alike.

“He never drank, you know, Ellie. That was his character on television. But people believed he was an alcoholic in real life. Just goes to show what face you show people in public is not necessarily the face you show yourself in the mirror every morning. Sometimes we have to pretend to be somebody else to get the job done.”

My dad was a consummate philosopher, which added to his talent at characterizations to find ways to influence people, including me. He’d pull his shoulders back, stick out his chest, and talk with a New York accent, pretending he was some sort of famous boxer. He always had a way of pacifying my refractory teen attitude. “Whatchoo lookin’ at?” he teased me if I threw him a snide curl of my lip while in one of my brooding moods as he danced around on his toes, fists circling in front of his chest. I’d take the same stance, breaking me out of my funk, and he’d throw a roundhouse punch right over my head to start our play boxing until I gave in with a hug around his waist.

“Dad, Mom says you went to college, so why are you driving a truck when you could have been a professor?” I asked when I was at an age to believe any education beyond high school meant you must be brilliantly smart.

My dad would start to pontificate. “Because, Ellie, and listen to me—this is very important. Don’t look down on me because of what I chose to do. I love what I do, and it took me a few years to figure that out. When I met your mother, I was in college because it was what my parents wanted. I love learning, but I love the freedom of the road more. I didn’t want to work at a desk inside four walls with a boss, jump to a bell, or meet a deadline. Sure, I have deadlines when hauling, but I have freedom too. I found out early what I love to do. You need to find the same. Keep track in your young little head of what makes you happy,” he’d say as he tapped gently on top of my head with its tightly pulled-back hair.

I had a comfortable relationship with my dad, but my mother was another story. She never took too much interest in me other than the fame I brought her by the time I got to high school and ranked top in the nation in cross-country running, and later I ranked number one worldwide for

ultraendurance running. Before their divorce, I was mostly an inconvenience to her lifestyle.

The reason I figured my parents bickered all the time when my dad was not on the road was my mom didn't like him at home. She didn't like him hanging around, because it cramped her style, and that style was having multiple affairs. Her self-worth was based on how men paid attention to her—too beautiful to be kept in a farmhouse, bored with mundane chores, a husband on the road all the time, and no motivation to hold a job. She invited the attention-giving men to her.

I was an inconvenient pair of eyes and ears in her secret world. She didn't mind when I was out running in the hills or hanging around with the horses. It was the perfect opportunity to sneak in a little male diversion for herself, especially when I was at school. If she needed more time for dalliances—say, on a weekend—she would dare me to run to town with the promise of picking me up later. Soon I figured out I had better run back because she wasn't going to show up. I would take some money from her purse, run to town, eat half a pie at the bakery, and run back.

Back then I felt responsible for my parents' divorce. I felt I started it all. My father had returned home one night and asked my mom what she did with her time while he was away. It was a typical question. She replied with the same typical story, and he didn't listen as usual, as his eyes were glued to reruns of Dean's TV show. But this time I had had enough. My thoughts went back to the day before he got home.

I was miffed for some reason. Probably hadn't done something right in my mom's eyes, so I would get even with her by not going to school. Not sure why I picked that day to play hooky. I never played hooky, because I loved getting away from home. Some would say it was fate. I watched from the barn as a car drove up and a man got out. Nothing too unusual to me, because people came to see their horses all the time. But this guy walked into the house and didn't come out for quite a while, so I sneaked up to peer in through a window, somehow knowing, with an aching gut, that I would see something to validate my suspicions and increase my animosity toward my mother. I stared just long enough, then I turned to run. That was how I dealt with things. I ran.

During this typical conversation upon my dad's first night back home, my quiet, deep-seated rebellious side surprisingly piped up behind the protection of my dad sitting in his TV recliner. Before I could stop my vengeful mouth, I asked her, "Who was that man who came to visit inside the house for a few hours?"

I'll never forget her glaring down at me with a mix of shock and anger through narrowed eyes and a furrowed brow. Her eyes shifted toward my father, her eyebrows arched in desperation. Her chin started to tremble. I saw her irises turn dark green, set off by the slight wet, red glow encasing them. I finally outed my mom, but it didn't feel as satisfying as I thought it would. It backfired, hit my dad, ricocheted off him, and hit me. I threw it back at her, hitting her squarely between the eyes. She never saw it coming. How could she have imagined I didn't know what was going on? She expected I was that naive. She assumed I was engulfed in my own little world, as the psychologist had explained. Maybe I was.

My malicious tattling caused a burning chasm between my mother and me. I also broke the tenuous bond in their defective marriage, yet I hated myself for changing the only world I knew. The intense pain I felt in my stomach when my father packed up all his clothes never went away. The pain bounced around my body, depending on which memory triggered it. At times my heart ached to have two parents together again, remembering the laughter and fun times. Other times my head hurt when remembering how I should have thought things out before I instigated the dismantling of my family. I could have kept her secret.

Most of the stuff in our house was a collection of things he didn't care about, except me. The agony of watching him pack and walk out the door while not being able to go with him left me empty. The only reprieve I had was when I got far away from any reminder that he no longer lived with us. I ran to get away from my parents' arguments, and then I ran to get away from the silence. The burden of emotions I carried disappeared when I ran. But my running started way before I understood the need to feel free.

I realize now their unhappiness was not only my mother's fault. It started when I was still in early elementary school. They always started to fight after the usual one happy night of reunion. When the bickering and

mean words started up, I would head outside, even in the winter, to try to get as far away as possible. I would run to find peace, until I no longer heard their voices echo in the woods. The forest around the farm brought me solace and became my replacement family. It raised me. The horses we boarded became my siblings in my make-believe adventures as an explorer, cowgirl, or Indian princess. They would watch me with their particular equine mix of big-eyed nervousness and snorting arrogance, oblivious to the role I gave them to play.

Out in the forest, each of us respected each other. The trees only whispered when they talked. Even in a windstorm, despite the audible complaints of their creaking bodies, they made me feel welcome. I felt safe and at home in their world. I felt a primal strength grow within me in the middle of a dark forest while watching a storm brewing in the distance, with winds picking up their strength, chaotically whipping my long hair against my face and whistling whispers in my ear. I felt if the trees could bend to survive storms, so could I. I became a warrior against the winds. The increase of static electricity made me test the limits of time I could remain outside while guessing how long it would take me to sprint back to the house before the hail or rain would sting my exposed skin. I would arrive safely in the back entrance, laughing at my private race against the rain, toweling off before being chastised for wetting the kitchen floor. Those days I was always running from something, and I never wanted to run back.

My parents' divorce gave me a bit of hope for relief from the tension and loud arguments, until I realized I was only going to be staying with my mother. It was not like my mother and I hated each other. I connected much more with my father's free-roaming spirit. I thought we would be together on the road, living one thrilling adventure after another. Having a father who worked away meant he wasn't the disciplinarian. He was the parent who played. He hated laying down the law. But again, I never wanted to misbehave around my father. On the other hand, my mother and I were like two cats in a bag.

My mother did care about me. At least, she tried in her weird ways. She loved me, but caring is a different thing. She wanted to connect with me on

the feminine level, even though I was obviously a tomboy. It made her happy to show me how to dress up to accentuate my femininity, which I didn't think existed. Sometimes I stepped out of my self-centeredness to make her happy, or maybe I felt sorry for her. She was easier to be around when she was happy. She wouldn't nag me to do something, even though I had already done it. Whatever it was, it was never good enough. I was never good enough for some reason. I let her show me how a proper lady would sit, walk, eat, and make conversation. She said a woman should be polite and agreeable, and let the man lead the way. I didn't realize that being obsequious was the last thing I should do.

People always flattered her by saying we looked like sisters. She would roll her eyes in false denial, reaching over to press my shoulders into her against my resistance. Really? I was teensomething, and she was thirtysomething. We had similar features, but they appeared so much better on her than on me. We were both tall and lean, with shoulders that were too wide and hips that were too narrow and not ideal for childbearing, which was why I was an only child. She almost died giving birth to me. We were more like women in male bodies with breasts. That is why I came from a long line of one-child families on her side. Rotten luck.

She had nothing else she could do but flaunt her beauty until alone, divorced, and broke. She discovered she did have some hidden talents. She could recognize every herb, flower, shrub, and tree in the forest. Her estranged father taught her everything he knew about nature when he was around. That was the only place they had spent time together. She never talked much about my grandfather when I was growing up, trying to deny her upbringing. Much later she accepted this unique education, and with a little more research and experimentation, she would brew up aromatic natural healing concoctions in our kitchen. There were tinctures, oils, salves, cough syrups, teas, spices, powders, and natural foods she sold in the local farmers' market, and she soon became famous in our little valley. Then she became famous in the state and later nationwide. Eventually, she would oversee a small corporation and do very well for herself.

I know now my mother rarely talked about her father with me because one of her greatest fears was I would not be able to control my free spirit,

and I, too, would blow away from her life just like he did. She resolved to allow my free spirit to run through the forest that was close to home, and she rarely allowed me any other freedoms. That is until I got Blue. Just the mention of his name overwhelms me with emotion. He taught me unconditional love, never yelled at me, criticized me, or was disappointed in me. He listened and didn't judge. He was different; I know that now. I thought having a dog meant I would make the decisions. I would be in control. I thought a dog followed while I, the master, led. But Blue was no ordinary dog.

Chapter 2

Finding Each Other

I recognize her voice. It awakens a memory so deep inside of me. I cannot contain this antecedent yearning to be near her. I never forgot how her love felt, no matter how many lives I've lived. Hers was a love that walked through my open heart and then dragged the rest of my lives on this earth with it. I shut my heart from that moment onward—for an eternity. I heard her voice in every beautiful sound the earth gave me. I have seen her face—this face—in brilliant flares of memories, every moment of my soul's existence.

Everything I have ever sensed, felt, touched, and saw about her has lingered within my soul. This is true for all souls. The things you may only barely detect, like a bird that lands on a rail in front of you, or the sound of distant laughter have an infinitesimally small effect on you. Yet some things, like witnessing a hero's triumph or the look of gratefulness in desperate eyes, or the feeling you have as reciprocated love leaves its mark on your heart, these never leave you. They change your life and lives to come through a cellular resonance.

I peer over my unsophisticated littermates. Her voice and scent pull me like a magnet. I am frantic to have her notice me. I will do the best I can to get myself right inside her arms and have her gaze into my eyes. Maybe then she will see who I am. As I clamber on top of my canine companions, I wonder if I act as dumbfounded as they do. All of them apparently new souls while I, on the other hand, am a seasoned soul transmigrator now apparently locked in a canine-shaped safe with no combination to set me free. Once again I have been returned to this earth for further attempts at redemption. Such agony at not being able to feel the true joy of reconciliation as two humans. Am I never allowed to be human again?

Apparently, this life I am to be persecuted in a prison of fur and four legs, keeping me painfully distant from showing the immense love I am meant to give that I felt only once before many lives ago. How can I, as merely this insignificant creature covered in fluff and slobber, make right the wrongs that are centuries old and overdue?

Sparkling bits of vivid memories and images flooded back like déjà vu as soon as I first detected her with my astute sense of smell. Yet through all my past lives I have never forgotten the feelings of love, remorse, and an overwhelming need to repair my past wrongs to her. Out of all the creatures I have been in my past lives, with deep regret, the weakest was of being a human. The weakness had allowed me to destroy lives with such purpose and not for food or protection, but only for ego.

Now this rebirth and seeing her has resurfaced my instincts for love. Can this girl allow me to love her in a capacity that exists only in some fashion of canine loyalty? I am the one you need to pick from these scoundrels, these weak new souls. Take me away from this hoard of drool and mayhem. Find me. Here I am. Pick me.



I never thought any kind of excitement could be topped, until the day I met Blue. I remember I couldn't decide which pup would be the right one. I had read somewhere if you sit down in the middle of them, one will choose you. Out of the litter of eight chubby, soft balls of fur, a distinctive white-brown-and-gray one climbed over his littermates, tripping on his stubby legs, rolling and somersaulting in his effort to get to me while wagging his sprig of a tail. He ambled his way right up onto my cross-legged lap, stood up on his short awkward hind legs, forelegs extended up onto my tummy, and peered up at me. I picked him up and stared into his cloudy gray eyes that were talking a language I could feel but couldn't understand. I sniffed his folded, sweet-smelling ears that seemed too small for his head. He wiggled and licked my nose. The rest of the pups were just as cute and in a variety of colors, but none of them were as strong and determined as this one. He didn't cry or whine like the others. He only

stared at me. His soft paw landed on my lips as we inspected each other. The owner wasn't sure of the breed, as she rescued the mother off the street, and she was already pregnant. She guessed the litter was a mix of husky and border collie or Australian shepherd.

"They may turn blue in the future. Hard to tell when they are so young," the dog owner explained. His eyes did indeed turn a multitude of blues. We did not buy a pup that day. It was my heart that was sold to a dog I simply named Blue.

Chapter 3

Blue

She hasn't let on she knows who I am—who I really am—or even if she knows who she truly is. I am doing my best to show her as we spend every living moment together when she is not in school. I have so much to tell her, so much to say, but I can't. My voice is trapped in this canine cage with a futile tongue that gets in the way. I can't pierce my lips or form logical sounds in this oversized mouth. Every word I attempt starts and ends in my throat, with nothing to push it out. I will have to show her how smart I am. Maybe she will figure out the connection between the two of us, and I can tell her everything will be all right now. I will show her through my vassal love that we are soul mates, and I would go to the ends of the earth and to the end of time for her.

There are things I like about being a dog. I grow into my paws while my legs grow faster and stronger. My senses are incredibly acute. I can hear a fly sneaking up on my tail or discern whose car is turning up the lane two miles away. I can smell the weather changing in the wind, the gofer in his den, the squirrel at the top of the tree, and my tennis ball in a bush. I can smell cells of all living things—every organic chemical upwind or near my nose. I can smell emotions.

If all life began in the ocean a few hundred million earth years ago, and all mammals are connected by the history of our saltwater cells, I have truly discovered the connection of our common ocean of blood, sweat, and tears through the nose, heart, and tongue of a dog.



I immediately shared my love of nature and horses with Blue. I discovered he had no concept of size or difference in creatures. Anything or anyone had to be within his control or at least watched. It was like he was a commander of an army or something. Everything from bird to animal to human had to be in line, according to him. That didn't work well for almost everything. The horses barely tolerated him. He nipped and barked at their hooves, successfully dodging any hasty kicks. Once they were rounded up, he would lay down proudly as if to say, "The soldiers are under control, Captain."

I started to notice interesting things about Blue I didn't think were normal in dogs. If I so much as glanced his way and nodded my head to come, he would respond as if he had read my mind. He always listened attentively to me. He rarely disobeyed a command. As he began to recognize my signals and commands, I tried to unlock his language. His methods of communication came in the tilt of his head—ears up, back, or to the side—the narrowing of his eyes; his smile with his teeth showing or lips closed; his different panting, with tongue out or in; and all the various hums, huffs, growls, moans, sneezes, coughs, whines, whimpers, sighs, and various barks and howls. I learned to speak dog. But whatever I thought I understood about him, he appeared to know way more about me. He seemed smarter than me in many ways I cannot explain and may never understand.

I guess the counselor was right: Blue did bring me out of my shell, but not out of my solitary one. I was now solitary plus one. My shell just opened wider to more adventures. In his young months, we went for very short walks. But as he grew stronger, and after he was a full grown and got the go-ahead from the vet, we would run for hours. Blue and I became Lewis and Clark, going further away from the farm, mapping out new routes, and sometimes getting completely lost, but he always found the way back. Soon our adventures together went deeper into the mountains. When I got my driver's license, off we'd go to the higher mountain ranges and camp overnight. I never feared anything with him by my side, and Mom trusted him to watch over me. It was a battle at first, but she eventually relented. She didn't have a choice. I had great grades, won the state cross-country championships, and later the nationals. Her threats

motivated me to be a good kid because I never forgot the words she said when I first got Blue: “If you get into any trouble, Giselle, or give your dad or I any back talk, we will take the dog away.”

And I believed her.

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