

## One-Eyed Wonder

It started with my old spitfire horse instructor, Mrs. Wells. Eighty years old, ninety four pounds, and standing about five feet tall, she was as cantankerous as they come. And she was the only person that would have been able to make me get on the back of that crazy little pony named Noodles. She was mean. She was vicious. She had one eye, and she was the one thing that scared me the most. With her short legs, and overweight body covered in gray and white hairs, she was definitely not in the category of pretty. But nevertheless, she was mine.

“Just get on her! Quit your crying and just ride her. She’s not going to hurt you!” Mrs. Wells was at it again, trying to make me ride that terrifying beast again. There was no way I was going anywhere near that animal.

“Mrs. Wells, that pony hates me. Every time I go near her, she tries to kill me. Forget actually getting on her.”

“Ha! With that attitude, she definitely will.” She smirked. “I never thought you to be such a coward. Just get on her, stop being so dramatic.” Mrs. Wells clearly had no idea what this pony was capable of.

Here I was an innocent twelve year old girl, just trying to live out a childhood dream of riding a sweet tempered, cute, little white pony. I never wanted to even go near that evil creature, and I’m sure she didn’t even want me around her anyway.

“Just go and get her. Now!” Mrs. Wells screamed.

So I walked up to her pasture, which was about a mile away from the actual barn. The whole way there, I pouted and tried to come up with excuses that I could use to get out of getting

her. But excuses were not needed. When I got to the pasture, I walked up to the gate, and looked for her. Of course she would be at the very back of the pasture, and the only horse that was not paying any attention any attention. Slowly, I opened the gate, as not to disturb her and walked slowly and carefully, hoping she was in the kind of mood that would allow me to catch her without getting attacked. As soon as I got close enough to where she could actually see me, she immediately looked up, pinned her ears, and glared at me, with her one eye. I stopped walking.

I felt as if I were a matador going against the angry bull in the pin, but instead of a sword to defend myself with, I had a simple halter. I knew I had no protection against the beast. Noodles turned her entire body now to face me, and lowered her head as if she were about to charge. I took a step back. I did not sign up for this. She flared her nostrils. I took a step forward, and then another. Very slowly did I begin to approach her. As I got close enough to see the demon in her eyes, that's when she took off. Like a bullet she ran away from me, all the way to the other side of the pasture. And so the dance began. We played this game for a good while, which was fine with me. As long as she was not trying to kill me, the longer I had, before I had to catch her and actually ride her.

Finally after ten minutes of chasing her around the paddock, I began to grow tired and annoyed with her. She ran into a corner, which I decided to act on. I was going to catch her now. I had to, there was no way she could escape... or so I thought. She glared at me with her ears pinned and her nostrils flared, and then suddenly she stopped. She became aware that she had no escape, which is when I decided to walk quicker. I began to take the halter off of my shoulder, and got prepared to throw it around her head. She waited. As I slowly put the rope around her neck, she decided to rebel. Suddenly, she darted out of the rope, throwing me and my halter to

the ground. She stopped when she saw that I had fallen, perked her ears up, and trotted away looking quite pleased with herself. She knew that she had won.

Angry and covered in dirt and horse manure, I walked slowly out of the pasture and back down to the barn. I hated that pony more than anything. Mrs. Wells took one look at me and laughed.

“Where’s Noodles?” She asked sarcastically. “I think she likes you Erin.”

“Funny, Mrs. Wells.” I replied holding back the few choice words I really wanted to say.

“No, I mean it. Did she try to kick you?”

“No.”

“Well, there you go. She definitely likes you. If she didn’t, trust me, you would know. She is just messing with you. You just need to show her who is boss, that’s all.”

What was worse than what she had already done? She practically threw me in the mud, and I was not even riding her. I was quite upset. All I wanted to do was just ride a pony, and Mrs. Wells would only let me on that one. Why that one?

The next day I returned to the barn. It was a sunny autumn afternoon, so it was beautiful out, perfect for a horse ride. Something in the air seemed different. It seemed calmer, like I maybe had a chance to actually ride the beast today, but maybe it was just false confidence that was left over from yesterday’s anger. I walked up to the pasture calmly, and taking my time. I wanted to savor whatever goodness that was still left in the day. When I got to her pasture, again she was the only one not paying any attention to me, so I walked in and closed the gate behind me.

This time she did look up at me, and as usual, she pinned her ears, but something about her expression was different. I walked up to her, and waited for her to take off, but instead, she just stood and waited for me. I walked up to her neck and tied the rope around her, neck in order to get the halter on her, and she stood still and waited. I attached the halter, completely surprised by her complete mood swing and began walking with her toward the gate. As I approached the gate I felt her head shoot up and her body stop. Just as I turned my head to look at her, she bolted, jamming my hand into the twisted rope, and nearly dragging me with her. I should have known.

I let go of the rope and held my newly injured hand, trying to stop the intense throbbing. Tears began to brim from my eyes, not only from the intense pain, but from the completely broken confidence. I sank down to the ground holding my hand, and sat there pondering. As I was sitting there, with my head down, suddenly I felt a warm, soft nose touch my knees. I looked up, assuming it was one of Noodles' pasture mates, but was completely surprised to find her standing in front of me. Her ears were perked toward me and her head was lowered to my level. She looked at me with her one eye, and for once she didn't look angry. In fact, she looked almost apologetic. As apologetic as a horse could look of course.

We looked at each other for a little longer, when she began nudging me to get up. This pony sure was full of surprises. I grabbed her lead rope, and began to walk her out of the pasture with her following quietly. I walked her down to the barn and tied her to a post, so that I could groom her. Her coat was quite dirty. She looked rather shabby which told me how long it had been since anyone had worked with her. As I brushed her, she seemed to enjoy it. For the first time, I began to feel bad for her. Everyone was so scared of her, that she was never given any attention anymore. I put my saddle on her, and walked her down to the riding ring. She was

being surprisingly quiet and nice now. As I was about to mount onto her, she suddenly kicked out. I jumped back in shock. Why had she waited until now to act up again? I grabbed her reins again and jumped onto her back before she could strike out at me again.

Once I was on her, she pulled her head down to the ground and walked quickly toward the gate to leave the ring. I quickly pulled back on the reins to stop her, and as I did, she reared up onto her hind legs. Frightened, I grabbed her neck. She then landed and took off into a full gallop. She was absolutely wild! All I could do was hold on until she stopped. Suddenly I saw the scrawny outline of Mrs. Wells in front of us. Noodles was going to run over her! Panicked, I felt myself grab the reins and pull her to the left, to swerve her out of the way. Noodles veered over to the left as smoothly as butter and quieted her stride to a pleasant canter. Behind me, I heard Mrs. Wells yelling ecstatically about my riding. Even twenty feet away from me, I could feel her pride in me.

Eventually Noodles slowed to a walk, and then a full halt, when Mrs. Wells approached me. Still a bit panicked from what had just happened, I looked down at the tiny old woman. Her hard eyes were twinkling in excitement. Noodles snorted.

“I told you she liked you!” She exclaimed.

“You call that liking? She almost killed you!”

“But she didn’t, did she?” Mrs. Wells smiled.

That was the first thing I learned about Noodles: she was all talk, and no action.

“Go out to the big field out there and let her go. You need to understand this pony, if you are going to ride her.” She said.

“If you insist,” I replied.

I led Noodles up to the giant field that was up the road from our barn. The grass was golden with the sun's light on it, and the trees were every color you could think of. It was stunningly beautiful to say the least. Noodles tossed her head playfully, and stamped her foot. I knew then exactly what she wanted. She wanted to run. I only had begun to lightly tap her with my legs, when she took off like a bullet, her gray mane flying in the wind. She was brilliant. She snorted through the air, and ran as fast as she could. It was so smooth and calm. That was when I realized, I found the pony that I had been looking for. When we hit the edge of the woods, I pulled her up a bit to a delicate trot, and she plunged into the woods with excitement. I could see in her eye how excited she was. It twinkled.

I led her back to the barn just as it was getting dark. When we finally returned, I jumped off of her back and walked over to her face to look at her. Her whole face was lit up with excitement and happiness. Although she was not the prettiest horse in the barn, with that expression on her face, she looked beautiful. As I turned her back out to her pasture, I took off her halter, and let her begin to walk away. Before she left, she turned to face me. She was looking at me. She was studying me. I put my hand on her face, and she slowly lowered her head into my chest. She held it there for a minute, then stepped back, turned, and trotted off to meet her pasture mates. I will never forget that moment, for it was the moment where I learned trust and true friendship.

From that day forward, I rode Noodles almost every day. I would run to the pasture gate and jump over the fence with her halter at hand; she would see me and trot over to meet me. We began to make a bond that could never be broken. I would ride her everywhere, and eventually, we began to do jumps. I did not think she was capable of jumping, due to her disability, but as it turned out, she loved jumping even more than galloping. She was the most spirited little creature

I had ever known. One day after I was finished with riding, and was grooming her down for the night, Mrs. Wells came over to us.

“It looks like you two have become pretty close, huh?” She asked.

“Yeah, I guess so.” I replied.

“Well, there is a show coming up, and I was wondering if you wanted to take her into it.”

“How high are the jumps?”

“Well, you see that’s the thing. See Noodles has not ever been shown before, but I figure that she’s capable of two-foot-nine, to three foot jumps.”

I had never jumped that high in my life, but as long as I was trying new things, why not?

“Umm, sure I guess so Mrs. Wells. I mean if you think she can do it, then we can go.”

“Atta-girl,” was all she replied. She smiled through her wrinkly skin, and walked away. I could tell that she was overly pleased with my progress with Noodles over the past few months. But there was one thing I was worried about: Noodles had never shown before. Showing for horses, can be a very stressful thing, if they are not used to it. They are asked to perform a very trying task of jumping a multitude of jumps in a single round, as smoothly as possible. I looked at the barn calendar that night when I got home. The show Mrs. Wells was referring to was in a week. Needless to say, I was nervous.

For the next week, every day I was conditioning her so she would be able to do the show. She seemed to sense the nerves I had, so acted very serious. On the Friday before the show, she was jumping perfectly, but then I realized something. She looked nothing like a show horse. Show horses were big, with perfectly brushed tails, shiny coats, and painted feet, and most importantly, two eyes. As I looked Noodles over, her mane was overgrown, her tail was a

knotted mess, and her coat had stains of brown and yellow in it. She was looking a little rough to say the least.

It took me three shampoos to get all of the dirt and stains out of her coat, and two hours to groom her mane and tail. I could not do anything about the eye, but by the end of the wash and the groom, she was actually beginning to look like a horse. I never had noticed how white her coat really was. It was beautiful. All though she was still overweight and short, to me she looked like a show horse. That night I was worried that she was going to roll. I knew it. It had rained the previous day, so her pasture was full of mud holes, and those were Noodle's favorite. I practically ran out to her pasture in the morning, and expected to find a creature that was no longer a horse, but there she stood, in the one section that was no muddy, completely white and brilliant looking as she had the night before. I was so excited.

She trotted over to me expectantly as usual, and I gave her, her daily treat, and took her down to the barn. By the time we got down there, more trailers had shown up with their kids and horses. Not only were the horses fancy and perfect looking, but so were the kids. All I had to show in was a polo tee-shirt and some nice jeans. All of these kids were wearing riding clothes, tall boots, and nice jackets. It was clear then that we were going to be the outcasts.

I tried my best to ignore the other kids, because I needed to focus on the show. Each time I went to visit Noodles, she was looking more and more uneasy. She was beginning to realize what was going on. I gave her a lot of treats, and groomed her for a long time, which seemed to calm her down. She listened to me now. She trusted me. I knew that today, no matter what; I could not let her down. She buried her head in my chest as I began talking to her to calm her. Until that moment, I never realized how much I had grown to love this pony.

I mounted onto her, and took her down to the ring. All of the other horses were already there, lined up and waiting. We were the last ones to arrive. Everyone turned and looked at us. We stuck out like a sore thumb. Some people began snickering at the fact of my outfit, and others were talking about Noodle's missing eye. I tried my best to ignore them. Noodles kept her head down. I gave her a pat, and talked to her. She turned her head around and rested her chin on the toe of my boot. I could tell she was as nervous as I was. Finally we were called into the ring. I had to choose her show name, so I had thought long and hard about it all week, and finally it came to me.

"Now in the ring, number 188, this is One Eyed Wonder, ridden by Erin Creen." called the announcer. I heard the crowd and even the judge laughed behind me. Now was it. It was our time to finally shine. I told her to pick up her canter in and lead her toward the first jump. Suddenly it was just me and her. I forgot about the people watching, and I forgot about everything except for the course and her. As we headed towards our first jump, I held my breath; it was defiantly bigger than I had imagined it would be. As soon as I felt myself worry, I felt Noodles speed up under me. She was nervous too. We approached the jump and I closed my eyes as I felt her leave the ground.

And then it was over. We had landed, and were now cantering away from the jump. She was waiting for me to tell her where to go next. That is when I realized that she was okay with this, and we were fine. I looked up and led her through the rest of the course with the ease that we had been practicing all week. As we finished our course, a huge sense of pride rushed through me, and I reached down and patted her on the neck. I did not even care if we won anything, to me we were champions. She was the pony that I had always wanted, and now I

finally had her. When we got out of the ring, a few people congratulated us and began to ask about Noodles. Everyone was impressed that she was able to jump that well with a missing eye.

After everyone was finished, we rode back into the ring to be placed for our course. I was almost certain that we had not won anything until the announcer called out,

“Third place goes to number 188, One Eyed Wonder, ridden by Erin Creen.” I almost screamed with excitement. I reached down and patted Noodles as she trotted forward. As we walked up to the person giving out ribbons, Noodles pinned her ears and sneered at the woman, who backed away cautiously.

“Haha, don’t worry about her. She’s all talk.” I reassured her.

She gave us our ribbon, and I clipped it to Noodle’s bridle. We rode up to the barn after that so that I could take off her bridle and saddle, and brush her down. I looked around for Mrs. Wells. She was nowhere to be found. A bit disappointed, I began brushing down Noodles and got her ready to take out to her pasture. I jumped on her bareback and rode her up to her pasture. Before I left, I gave her one last treat, and she buried her head in my chest as she always did.

Suddenly, as Noodles was turning around to leave, a kid came running up to me from the barn.

“Are you Erin?” He asked.

“Yeah, why?” I replied.

“Someone told me to tell you that Mrs. Wells had a stroke. She’s in the hospital.”

That was all he could say before I was running as fast as I could down to my car. My dad was there waiting already. Before we left, I grabbed my ribbon. It did not belong to me. There were no words spoken in the car, only tension. When we got to the hospital, I ran inside and demanded to see Mrs. Wells.

“She’s in room 14-A” The nurse said.

“Is she okay?” I asked. I was too worried that I did not want to hear the answer.

“We think she will be okay, but nothing is certain yet.” replied the nurse.

I ran down the hallway to her room, with the ribbon in my hand. The door was closed, so very quietly I opened the door and looked inside. There she lay. She looked even smaller and more fragile than usual. Her face looked paper thin, her body crumpled. A tear welled up in my eye.

“Mrs. Wells, I... I just thought you should know that we... you won this. We got third Mrs. Wells, but the ribbon is yours. You are the reason that I rode Noodles today. You earned this. You should have seen her Mrs. Wells, she was so happy out there. She was like a completely different horse. She was amazing. Thank you, Mrs. Wells. Thank you for everything you have done.” The tears came then.

I left the ribbon on her side table, so when she woke up she would see it. I walked out of the room, and into the waiting room to meet my dad. We walked out silently.

The next day I went to go visit Noodles. She trotted over to meet me as she always did, and I jumped onto her bareback. I rode her out of her pasture and took her to the giant field where I had first galloped her. As she ran, I felt the wind through my hair and the cold air in my lungs. It cleared my head and let me think. I took Noodles back to her pasture then and let her go. She did not run away this time, as she normally did when she was done saying goodbye. Instead she stayed by my side and looked at me with her one eye. I looked at her. Through her, I began to feel that everything was going to be okay. It was if she was telling me to calm down. I buried my head in her neck and began to cry. She was my best friend. She stood there and waited calmly, and patiently.

As weeks passed, Mrs. Wells began to recover. I went to the barn every day and waited for her return. Finally, one day as I was coming back from a trail ride with Noodles, I saw her standing in the barn. I kicked Noodles into a gallop and got there as fast as I could. I jumped off to run to see her. When she saw me, she smiled, and pulled the ribbon out of her pocket.

“Is this yours?” she asked. Her speech was slower than usual.

“No, Mrs. Wells. It’s yours. We won it for you. Keep it.”

She nodded quietly for a little bit.

“Well, thank you.” She said after a while.

I smiled, and very carefully gave her a hug. She then looked at Noodles.

“One Eyed Wonder, eh? Yeah, that defiantly fits her if anything. She is really something else.”

I smiled and looked into her twinkling eye.