

Billy's Story

It was November, and I was lying on the concrete floor in the barn where the farmer had chained me to a post. It was cold and dark, and when I heard a car draw up by the cottage next to the farm, I barked quietly a few times. Suddenly there was a scrambling sound on the bank near the barn, and a beam of light shone onto me. Quickly I curled myself into a ball. I didn't look up, and soon the light went away. But in the morning I heard the scrambling sound again, and a voice said "Hello, what are you doing all on your own?" It was a gentle voice, not like the loud shouting I was used to and which frightened me, but I stayed where I was, curled into a ball, my empty food bucket lying on its side nearby, and dog mess around me on the floor.

After a while I heard footsteps, and the heavy barn door banged open. It was the farmer. "He's a border collie," I heard him say, "but totally useless. I've loaned him out several times but he hasn't a clue what to do with sheep." I remembered being brought back to the farm the day before, and the angry swearing as I was thrown out of the truck into the yard.

And then I heard the voice that had spoken to me earlier. "Would you let me bring a rug for him to lie on?" I still didn't look up. The farmer laughed. "Ann, this is a farm, not a hotel." But he said she could if she wanted to, and the next time she looked into the barn I was lying on the rug and not the concrete. For a day or two she brought me fresh water and some little biscuits. "They're really meant for cats," she said as she put a handful on the floor beside me, "but I hope you'll like them." I never looked up at her, but I did eat the biscuits when she'd gone.

"What's his name?" Ann asked the farmer.

"He hasn't got one," he replied. "Not one that I could repeat to you, anyway."

"What are you going to do with him?"

"No idea. He's useless. Someone in the village might take him. Otherwise, I'll..."

So she said "I've been thinking of having a dog for some time," although later she told me it wasn't true because she was out at work all day. The farmer undid the chain, tied some baler twine to my collar and handed it to her. "He's yours," he said.

Ann and I were both surprised that suddenly we belonged to each other, but I could tell she liked me. She lives in an old cottage, and at the time had five cats, so she took me into the garden while she tidied up a small stone outbuilding and made it comfy for me. Then we walked down the lane and into a field, and she untied the baler twine from my collar. "Let's play a game," she said, and picked up a stick that had fallen from a tree onto the grass. She didn't know then that you should never throw sticks for dogs to chase, in case they catch them awkwardly and become injured. She threw it, but I didn't watch where it went or run after it. I knew what to do when people held up a stick, and that was to lie as flat on the ground as possible, trying to be invisible so as not to be hit when the stick came crashing down. When Ann saw me lying there, somehow she knew why I'd done it. She knelt beside me and stroked the back of my neck. "Nothing bad's going to happen to you any more," she said. She tied the baler twine to my collar and we walked back to the cottage.

“I think I’ll call you Billy,” she said, and I wagged my tail to show her I liked the name. She bought a cushioned dog bed and some bales of hay to make the outbuilding cosy, and the next day I watched as she carried a shiny bag of biscuits from the car into the cottage. It was like the bag of cat biscuits she’d brought round to the barn, but it was much bigger so I knew it must be for me.

After a few days in my new home, we were walking in the field when suddenly I caught the faint, familiar scent of sheep, and before Ann knew what was happening I was racing towards a gap in the hedge and into the next field, and began chasing the sheep all over the place. By the time she caught up with me she was out of breath and looked very worried. “Come on Billy,” she said, and clicked my new lead onto my collar. I was pleased to see her, because although I liked chasing sheep I didn’t know what to do with them. Anyway, this incident made her realise that although she might know a thing or two about cats, she knew very little about dogs. She bought a book called ‘The Dog Listener’ and then signed us both up for a course of training to teach her about my behaviour and my needs. When we went to the first class, there were lots of people and dogs there. I was very anxious, and the trainer said she felt I’d been treated much more badly than Ann suspected. But I coped well, and after six lessons I was awarded a certificate saying I’d successfully completed the Beginners’ Course.

When I went to live with Ann, the vet thought I was about a year old. Ann wouldn’t have minded what I looked like when she led me away from the barn, but everyone says how handsome I am. At first, she worried about leaving me while she went to work, but friends nearby kept an eye on me and took me into the garden or out for a walk, and they reassured her that I seemed very happy. I’m still interested in sheep but Ann has a motto ‘Never trust an apparently empty field’ and has become annoyingly good at spotting unexpected livestock before I do and quickly calling me back. And we play some great games when we’re out. In one, I run on ahead and she raises her arm and calls “Come round” and I race back and round her up. In another, she hides treats in the grass or on the banks along our walk, and on the way home she says “Find” and I sniff along the route until I’ve found and eaten them all. Sometimes she hides behind a tree or in a gap in the bank, and I look for her and always find her.

I wish I could tell her about the first year of my life. She was told I was kept in a shed until I was six months old, so I didn’t grow up with sheep and learn how to behave with them. And she soon realised that the sight or sound of balls frightens me, especially footballs. We live near the seaside and I love to run along the beach, but when people play football or cricket there, or throw balls for their dogs, I still get anxious at even the distant sight or sound of these games. To begin with, I would race across the beach and up the sand-dunes to get away, but over time I’ve learnt to skirt round the games at a discreet distance, knowing I’ll soon be safely past them. Ann wonders if perhaps the dull thud of a football being kicked reminds me of the sound when I was being hit, or whether people used to throw or kick balls at me. She wishes she could take my early memories away, but she knows they’ll always be with me.

There are three cats here nowadays, all senior citizens. One of them, George, accompanies us on some of our walks and says he was a dog in a former life. Clover sometimes comes to meet us as we walk back up the lane, and Monty and I often have our breakfast together and sit quietly when we’ve finished, looking out onto the garden. And Ann

works from home now, which we all like. She loves all animals but says I'm the most loving, beautiful, intelligent and gentle dog anyone could have, and that she must have done something good in her life to have deserved finding me. I don't know about that, but although I've hardly ever barked since coming to live here, I'm very glad she heard me when I was chained up and lying in the barn on that cold November night.

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Ann Young
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