

JEN

A BORDER COLLIE'S TALE

- An Old Farm Dog Reflects On Her Life -

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- ONE -

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‘JUST YOU LIE there beside the car, Jen ... like a good dog.’

I’ve seen the day, not so long ago it seems, that I’d only have lain here ‘like a good dog’ until the Boss was out of sight. But these days ... well, I’m getting on a bit now – about fourteen in human years, they say – and the sunshine’s fine and warm, so I won’t bother tiptoeing after him to see what he’s up to this morning. Anyhow, I don’t suppose he’ll be doing anything I haven’t seen before, and many, many times at that. Castrating calves, most likely. A batch of them arrived last week, complete with nuts, I noticed, so they’ll be for the snip today, I reckon.

That’ll be why he’s got that vet chap with him. It’s his car I’m lying beside in the yard here, incidentally. I’ve always thought vets’ cars smell funny – not in a humorous way, you understand – but more sort of strange. Well, strange for me at any rate. All disinfectant and chemical-like. Medicines and worm

mixtures, stuff like that. You see, being a collie, and a Border collie at that, I'm what you might call a 'nature girl', and it's the smells of *natural* things that appeal to me. Things like the smell of newly turned soil when I'm following the Boss's tractor at ploughing time. Things like the tangy whiff of the midden when he's loading the dung-spreader on a frosty day. Things like the smell of sun-warmed straw at harvest. Even the nostril-nipping hum of the hen house when it's getting a much-needed muck-out by the Boss's wife. Aye, things like that. *Natural* things. Oh, and of course, I like the way I smell myself: fur all nice and imbued with aromas of the farm, which are too many and complex to describe, and with subtleties I'm afraid the human nose is incapable of appreciating. I learned that sorry fact a long, long time ago...

'THAT DOG STINKS to high heaven!' declared the Boss's wife, about a couple of months after I took up residence on this wee spread. 'She's mingin'! Just look at those dangleberries clinging to her rear end!'

'Ach, they're just sticky willies,' the Boss shrugged. 'Just weed seeds – nothing to bother about.'

'No, they are *not* just sticky willies, and don't you even *think* of allowing her into the house again when my back's turned!'

The Boss just smiled that wee smile of his. 'Yes, yes, whatever you say, dear. Whatever you say.' Then he gave me a wink, and I knew right away we were still on the same wavelength.

You see, that's the thing about humans who understand dogs: *they* know that *we* know what

they're thinking. Trouble is, *they* have to use words to communicate, whereas we dogs don't. That's why we have to laugh when we hear them saying: 'Oh yes, a *very* clever dog, that. Understands every word you say, you know.' Well, even the dumbest human should realise that's about as relevant as saying a dog would be good at painting the barn door, or making a five-bar gate, or playing the bloody bagpipes, for God's sake! When attempting to communicate with humans, we always try to get across to them that the thoughts are ours, while the words are purely theirs. Unfortunately, it isn't a concept many humans are capable of grasping.

But I digress. In case I forget (and I'm the first to admit that I *am* getting a wee bit forgetful at times), I'd better explain the background to that comment the Boss's wife made about me being 'mingin'. Oh, and another thing, if you're getting the impression that there's a bit of friction between the Boss's wife and me, I can assure you that nothing could be further from the truth, even though my calling her the 'Lady Bitch' may suggest there's a hint of animosity on my part. The opposite is the case, and I'll tell you why.

It's simple. Firstly, I regard her as a lady, and no less a lady than I regard myself. Also, she's a female of *her* species, and the term 'bitch' is the one used to define that gender in canine circles: the one that comes naturally to *me*. So, in every respect, my referring to the Boss's wife as the 'Lady Bitch' is no more a slight against her than it would be if the title were applied to me. Which I readily do – and I hold no-one in more esteem than I do myself. It follows, then,

that a state of mutual respect should exist between us. And it does. It's just that we have our own standards, our distinct sets of values and, not surprisingly, they differ in certain aspects.

I don't deny she's pretty, though. Not, of course, with the same kind of *animal* beauty I've been blessed with myself. I mean, you wouldn't expect anyone to say of the Boss's wife that she has lovely markings – lustrous black hair all over her body, with a white bib and matching socks, a nice shiny nose, and sharp-eyed as a fox. Nor would you hear anyone say to the Boss when seeing his missus for the first time: 'Bonnie-lookin' wee bitch ye've got there, pal. She'd throw fine pups, ye ken. Aye, get her served while she's young. She'll have a fine big litter in her, and ye'll make yersel' a right pile o' money for nothin'.' No, you wouldn't expect that to be said of her. But all the same, I must admit she *is* bonnie enough, in her own way. If only she wouldn't pollute herself with all that man-made scent stuff. Sickly-smelling flowery stuff. Not that I've anything against flowers, I should stress. Certainly not. But once again, I come down on the side of the more robust *natural* variety: dandelion, sow thistle, hogweed, even the wild garlic you find growing in the woods around here. Nothing better than a roll in the latter to keep the flies off in summer, by the way.

And this brings us back to the matter of the Lady Bitch calling me 'mingin', which, for those of you unfamiliar with the Scottish vernacular, can mean anything from a bit 'whiffy' to downright breathtakingly repulsive. An element of 'unkempt' is

often implied as well. Yet, while I confess to being somewhat miffed at finding myself on the receiving end of such an inappropriate expression, I don't hold it against the Lady Bitch. Indeed, I can understand her reasons. Almost. For the sake of harmonious relations, however, I prefer to treat her remark as merely an example of her own *particular* set of values, though regrettably misplaced in this case.

But more of that later. First, let me tell you how it all began...

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OLD DODDIE RUNS a flock of sheep on a remote place up in the Lammermuir Hills, about ten miles south of here. He's a good shepherd, old Doddie: nothing he doesn't know about sheep, and a highly-regarded breeder and trainer of sheepdogs as well. All Border collies, naturally. And if there's nothing Doddie has to learn about sheep, the same can be said about his knowledge of collies. He isn't slow to point this out to anyone who shows the slightest interest, and even to those who show absolutely no interest at all.

'See them pups there,' he'd be known to say when showing off a new litter, '- well, Ah can tell at a glance the ones that'll make good workers, even if they're still no seein' right an' can hardly walk yet. It's a matter o' experience, ye see. A lifetime spent in the company o' sheep and collies. Yes, Ah was born tae it, just like ma father afore me an' his father afore him an' his father afore him, as far back as ye like tae go, like. It's in the blood, ye ken. Oh aye, Ah've

a bloodline as pure an' unadulterated as a pedigree Cheviot ram. Nah, nah, there's none o' yer hybrid vigour in me!

This was pretty much the spiel I overheard him giving the Lady Bitch the day she came to ask about buying one of his pups. That'd be about thirteen years ago now.

'Do ye, eh – do ye keep sheep yersel', mistress?' he asked her coyly.

'No, we don't have sheep. Cattle, but no sheep.'

'Ah well, they're no bred for workin' cattle, these pups, so maybe ye'd be better –'

'No, no,' the Lady Bitch cut in, 'we're not really bothered about that. It's just a dog to have about the place we need. One to keep an eye on things, you know.'

Old Doddie's face lit up. 'Ye mean a kind o' watchdog – a yard dog, as the Yanks ca' them on the telly?'

'Yes, more or less. And, you never know, we can maybe get it used to working with the cattle in time. But honestly, that's not too important at the moment.'

Old Doddie stroked his chin, thinking. Opportunity was knocking when least expected, so the door would have to be opened smartish. 'Aha, so it's *that* kind o' dog ye're after, eh? Well now, Ah just maybe have exactly what ye're lookin' for.' Doddie was willing his hands not to start rubbing themselves together. 'If, eh – if ye care tae come wi' me tae this wee pen at the side o' the lambin' shed here, mistress, Ah'll – eh – Ah'll let ye see what Ah mean, like.'

And that was the first time I set eyes on the Lady

Bitch. Actually, it was the first time I'd set eyes on *any* female of the human species. Old Doddie had never bothered to take a wife himself, you see. 'Never saw the point,' he used to say. 'Bloody expensive articles tae keep, them – what wi' their falderal frocks an' vacuum cleaners an' fancy cookin' an' everything. Cream cakes an' four-ply toilet rolls – money-squanderin' extravaganceries like that.'

I was pleasantly surprised, therefore, to see how attractive this female human was. That said, any human, female or otherwise, would have appeared attractive compared to old Doddie, who admitted being the nearest thing to a living scarecrow you'd ever see – and proud of it.

'But,' the Lady Bitch protested when she looked into the pen, 'these aren't puppies, they're fully grown dogs.'

'Aye, three o' ma best students – next generation o' champion sheepdogs, like. Just a bit past a year old, an' shapin' up tae be grand workers.' Old Doddie cleared his throat. 'Well, eh, no countin' Jen, the wee bitch there, that's tae say. Mind you,' he hastened to add, 'she's a grand wee collie in every other way. She's just no got the knack o' workin' sheep like her two brothers there. Oh, and afore ye say it, Ah know ye'll be wonderin' how ma eagle eye for judgin' a pup failed me on this occasion. Well, let's just say Jen has a mind o' her own. Aye, she's a free spirit, ye might say, an' Ah've never came across another dug like her in ma entire puff.' Doddie had warmed to his theme to such an extent that steam was almost belching from his ears. He grasped the Lady Bitch's

arm and whispered in tones of strictest confidence, ‘Honest, hen, Ah couldnae learn her nothin’!’

Struck with the sudden realisation that he may have been a tad *too* candid in his revelations, Doddie then waited with bated breath for the Lady Bitch’s reaction. ‘Oh, an’ just in case ye’re worried about her nature,’ he put in with some urgency, ‘Ah can assure ye, mistress, that Jen has the canniest dispossession ye’ll ever find in a collie. Very biddable in every way, just like her mother an’ father an’ many o’ them afore her ... except for followin’ orders wi’ the sheep, like. Aye, but clean in her habits, though. Never answers the call o’ nature in among the sheds an’ pens here – always away oot o’ sight somewhere. Never shits in her own nest, so tae speak.’

Even as a callow youngster, I could tell that if Doddie didn’t shut his mouth soon he’d blow his chances of getting me off his hands *and* trousering a tidy earner into the bargain. This bothered me, as I’d taken an instant liking to this human female. I liked her smile and admired the knowing way she looked at me. She understood. So, without wasting a second, I set about selling myself. Ignoring my brothers, who were diving about the pen like idiots, barking and showing off to their master, I sat quietly with my ears pricked, looking bright-eyed, alert and friendly, and most crucially, bombarding the Lady Bitch with we-were-meant-for-each-other thought waves. After all, being adopted by her could well be the best chance I’d ever get of finding a future away from old Doddie, who had made it abundantly clear that I had no future

with him anyway.

It was simply that he couldn't accept what *he* judged to be my lack of discipline, in comparison with my brothers, for example. They took being trained to work sheep very seriously and were keen as mustard to please old Doddie in every way. And they *were* damned good at the job. I'll give them that. Anyhow, the difference between them and me was essentially that they regarded herding sheep as their destiny, a prerequisite of life as unquestionable as breathing. They enjoyed it too, whereas I saw working to orders as a chore. I preferred to do things my own way, to have some fun with the sheep during my training sessions. And I'd be telling a lie if I denied deriving some mischievous pleasure from turning a deaf ear to Doddie's frantic whistling and his roars of '*Come by!*', '*Away tae me!*', '*That'll do!*' and, inevitably, '*Lie doon! Lie DOON, ye hoor!*' By this time, the sheep would have scattered in all directions over the face of the hill, and I'd be lying there in the heather, delighting in their response to this unexpected taste of freedom. Freedom! That was what life was all about, wasn't it?

While it goes without saying that I knew what all those commands of Doddie's meant, it just struck me as a bit demeaning for an intelligent creature to be expected to obey them without question. And I admit in all modesty that I *am* an intelligent creature – more intelligent than old Doddie himself, if you want to know the truth. I mean, to illustrate my point, take one of his own favourite sayings: '*Tae be able tae train a dog, ye have tae let it know first an' foremost*

that ye've got more between the lugs than it has.' Then he goes and confesses to the Lady Bitch that he 'couldnae learn me nothin'!' I rest my case.

Of course, such a self-critical notion would never enter Doddie's mind. And as it happens, I've found over the years that this is a fairly common failing in some humans: they're so stupid they think themselves clever. And even sheep aren't as thick as that.

A perfect example was old Doddie's reaction when he caught me playing 'Tig' round the dung midden with a couple of orphan lambs one afternoon. This pair of wee woollies had been bottle-fed since birth, so were as tame as can be, and, just like me, were always up for some fun as well. That's another thing about most humans: they seem unable to get their heads round the fact that so-called 'dumb animals', given a chance and the right conditions, will get along just fine with most other creatures. And this goes for commonly assumed 'adversaries' like sheep and sheepdogs as well. It isn't surprising, then, that nothing could have been farther from old Doddie's thoughts when he came round the corner that day and caught me cavorting with the two orphan lambs – especially since *they* were chasing *me*!

'What the fuck's goin' on here?' he bellowed, his face crimson. 'Ah've always knew there was somethin' weird about you, Jen – somethin' no just right. But what the hell would any o' ma herdin' cronies say if they saw *this*? A Border collie bein' rounded up by two pet lambs, for Christ's sake! Honest, ye're as thick in the heid as shite in a bottle, and ye'll be offa this place the minute Ah find somebody daft enough

tae take ye away!’

And it just so happened that the Lady Bitch turned out to be that somebody. However, if old Doddie had entertained any hopes of her being ‘daft’, he was in for a disappointment...

‘*How much?*’ she piped.

‘Just – eh – just the round hundred-and-fifty. Aye, a right bargain, considerin’ her pedigree an’ that. Best bloodline o’ workin’ collies this side o’ Australia!’

‘But that’s just the point. She *isn’t* a working collie. She’s a free spirit, as you put it, and your price doesn’t match your description.’

Old Doddie rolled his shoulders and surveyed his feet. ‘Aye, well, that’s as may be, mistress, but ye have tae appreciate Ah’m asking a fraction o’ the price Ah would be askin’ if she was fully –’

‘Fifty quid! Cash! Take it or leave it!’

Old Doddie glanced up and cocked a heedful eyebrow. ‘Fifty, ye say? Cash?’

‘In crisp fivers. Bought as seen. No pedigree required.’

‘Done!’ The good shepherd grabbed her hand and pumped it heartily. ‘But do me a favour, will ye?’

‘A favour?’

‘Aye, dinnae go breedin’ wi’ her. One Jen in the entire collie world is enough for any o’ us tae be goin’ on wi’!’

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- TWO -

I THREW UP on the way home. I'd never been in a car before, you see, and I didn't respond to the experience very well at all. I didn't expect the Lady Bitch to take too kindly to the result either: a gooey dollop of semi-digested Wilson's Dog Meal deposited on the floor of her otherwise spotless Ford Cortina. But she just smiled (a somewhat strained smile, admittedly), patted my head and told me not to worry: no harm had been done. Then she opened the side window, stuck her head out and threw up herself. Kindred spirits, I thought. We'd get on famously.

I'd been watching her as she drove, and it was clear we had much in common. She had poise, style. It may not have been the same kind of poise and style I automatically displayed when herding sheep – or, more accurately, when *purporting* to herd sheep – but the similarities were there nonetheless. Even the way she puked through the car window had a graceful quality to it, a quality I had never known in my only previous experience of a human. For instance, I'd taken for granted that all humans would share old

Doddie's habit of smoking a pipe and spitting out of the corner of his mouth every few seconds. He also farted regularly – usually when spitting. I noticed the Lady Bitch did none of these things. Yes, like me, she had class, and we'd get along just fine.

What had disagreed with me on the journey was the bumping and swaying and shaking of the car as it bowled along. The thrumming noise of the engine bothered me too, as did the faint but inescapable whiff of petrol fumes. Those fumes would have been irritating enough on their own, but mixed with the Lady Bitch's fake-floral perfume, they were more than my super-sensitive nasal sensors could endure.

I had started the trip up-front on the passenger's seat, right where the Lady Bitch had indicated I should sit. And I found the views from this elevated position intriguing: an enlightening experience compared to what had been little better than a worm's eye view of my surroundings when creeping stealthily round huddles of old Doddie's sheep on some bleak hillside. But the novelty of seeing broad new landscapes whizzing past in a blur of colour soon conspired with those other alien sensations to make me feel dizzy, then slightly queasy. I decided to slip down onto the floor of the car, where I curled up with my face close to the Lady Bitch's left foot. But now the vibrations and thrumming noises seemed more exaggerated than ever, and the Lady Bitch's habit of pumping her foot up and down on a pedal thing didn't help either. I could tell a vomit was imminent.

Although I was no stranger to throwing up (it's a dog *thing*, particularly during aftermaths of competing 'at

the trough' with a bunch of ravenous siblings), I had always done it in places where no human was around to take offence. In any event, the only human likely to be around would have been old Doddie, and he would have taken no more notice of one of his dogs puking in the bracken than he would a hen taking a dump on his window sill. But this in-car experience was different. I was acutely aware of that, and was pricked by a barb of remorse for having soiled the Lady Bitch's immaculate rubber car mat – not to mention her left shoe. But, cometh the problem for a collie, cometh the solution, and I promptly set about cleaning up the evidence of my 'mishap' in the way we dogs instinctively do. Which was when the Lady Bitch threw up for the second time.

That journey served as a lesson harshly learned for me, though, and I vowed there and then that no car would ever be graced with my presence again. Not if *I* could help it anyway.

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'WELL, JEN, HERE we are at your new home,' said the Lady Bitch when we drew into the yard at Cuddy Neuk. 'And I don't suppose you're sorry the trip from your old one is finally over, hmm?' She patted my head again, then added under her breath, 'And you can take it from me you're not the only one!'

But she was all smiles as she opened the car door and ushered me out. My first impressions were good. Very good. This was a neat and tidy yard, the opposite of old Doddie's ramshackle scattering

of tumbledown sheds and rickety sheep pens. Sure, there was a dung midden somewhere close by here as well – I could smell that plainly enough – but it was a nice, welcoming smell and I immediately felt at home.

The Lady Bitch was quick to notice. ‘I see your tail’s wagging, so that’s a good sign.’ She bent down and tickled me behind the ear. ‘Yes, I’m sure you’re going to like it here. And it’s all yours to look after on your own. No other dogs to compete with.’ She paused and looked at me with a lopsided little smile. ‘Not, I suspect, that you’d give a hoot if there were.’

How right she was. This was my patch now, and woe betide any dog, cat, hen, heifer, pigeon, postman, bullock, salesman, crow or truck driver that didn’t respect the fact.

‘Anyway,’ the Lady Bitch went on, ‘have a good sniff around. I’ll leave you to find your bearings for a few minutes, but don’t go wandering off where I can’t see you.’ With that, she reached back inside the car and pulled out the rubber mat I’d had my ‘mishap’ on. I heard her mutter something about scrubbing the mat (and her shoe) with hot, soapy water, as well as having to spray the floor with disinfectant. ‘God help us!’ she gagged. ‘No wonder I spewed!’

I didn’t let on I’d heard, of course, although I felt aggrieved, hurt even, at having my own efforts at cleaning up pooh-poohed in such an insensitive way. But I let the incident pass, realising that it had only been one of those differences in standards I told you about: little dissimilarities that would become apparent between us from time to time. She was

doing her best, and I gave her due credit for that. Not a problem. I mean, the way I looked at it, if she wanted to waste her time re-doing work that had already been done, it was no skin off my nose – to borrow one of your more curious expressions.

Which prompts me to remind you that only the thoughts expressed here are mine, while the words are entirely those of the human being who's attempting to translate them into a form you can understand. By the same token, it may also be a good idea for me to cease referring to the Boss's wife as the Lady Bitch, mindful as I am that, despite my earlier assurances, the use of that particular moniker still risks causing offence to the less open-minded of you. I think it's best, therefore, that I simply call her 'Lady B' from now on.

Now then, what was I talking about? Oh yes, my first impressions of Cuddy Neuk...

Like I said before, I took to it straight away. And it wasn't just the look of the place either, for I was equally impressed by the location. The little farmstead was set on the brow of gently rising land that rolled away over neat, walled-in fields and patches of woodland stepping all the way down to the sea, a mile or so to the north. I had seen the sea before, right enough, but it had been from a long way off, up in the hills at old Doddie's. From there, the views were so often blurred by mist and low cloud that any glimpse of sea you did manage to snatch had the appearance of a hazy extension of the sky. To be honest, I usually had to strain my eyes to make out any hint of horizon at all. And that's saying something, coming from a Border

collie, a breed of dog renowned for its sharpness of vision. Oh, by the way, you should hear old Doddie holding forth about *that* when he's in full pup-selling flow...

'See them dugs o' mine? Well, there's no another type o' creetchur in the whole actual animal kingdom that has eyesight as keen as them. Fair phenonimo it is.' He'd then be liable to point to the far horizon (or the lack of horizon I've just been telling you about) and say, 'Aye, if them dugs o' mine could talk, they'd be able tae tell ye what brand o' fag a man standin' on yon hillside was smokin'. OK, fair enough, Ah know ye might think it's uncanny, seein' as how the hills we're lookin' at are maybe upward o' thirty mile away, but it's still a fac' for a' that. Oh, yes indeed, a braw sense o' sight, them dugs o' mine. Could spot a sheep hidin' doon a coalmine wi' the lights oot. Damn right. Nah, nah, never been any crafty auld yowe could pull the wool ower *their* eyes. Tellin' ye!'

But there I go digressing again. To be frank, if I have a fault at all it's that I tend to drift away from the point sometimes. I know I do – especially recently. Anyway, what I was about to say was that the sea was now near enough for me to actually smell it for the first time ever. And I'll tell you this: it gave me a feeling of pleasure that I've never forgotten. Don't get me wrong – there was nothing bad about the air up on old Doddie's hillsides. Far from it. Indeed, the scents of heather and whin and the countless other wild plants and flowers you only find in the hills were a joy, even when tinged with the ever-present whiff of sheep, deer and grouse droppings. In all

fairness, though, the subtle smell of those ‘animal deposits’ (doubtless more apparent to dogs than humans) actually blended well with the other aromas I mentioned. They were all component parts of the character of the hills: *natural* things that a nature girl like myself feels at one with.

Yet the atmosphere at Cuddy Neuk, infused as it was with the faint, salty tang of the sea, was like a breath of fresh air to me. Literally. It’s hard to explain, but it somehow made me feel more *alive* than I’d ever felt before. Like the air, I was infused with a kind of, I don’t know, ‘sparkliness’ – *joie de vivre* you’d probably call it – and it appealed to me. A lot.

While I was standing there with my nose in the air, savouring every sniff of this new sensation, the wind changed slightly, and I became aware of an all-too-familiar aroma drifting into my nostrils. ‘Surely not!’ I thought. But a collie’s nose is nothing if not reliable, so I instinctively knew that mine wasn’t playing tricks on me now. I turned my head into the breeze, and sure enough, there they were, blissfully nibbling their way over the crown of a grass field on the other side of the road. ‘Bugger! And I thought I’d seen the last of sheep when I came here!’

But the Lady Bitch – sorry, Lady B – was about to reveal that she was more perceptive than she looked. And I say this with no intention of suggesting that I’d taken her to be in any way dim-witted. Not at all. It was simply that I’d assumed that any human’s powers of observation would be similar to old Doddie’s, and he was about as visually alert as a bat. I could give you examples, and I may – if I feel like it – but not

now. That would send me off at a tangent again, and I'm making a conscious effort to avoid that if I possibly can.

Now, where was I again? Oh yes, that was it. I was going to tell you about Lady B and the unexpected appearance of a bunch of sheep at the supposedly sheepless Cuddy Neuk.

'Don't worry, Jen,' she said when she noticed me staring wide-eyed across the road, 'they're not ours, so you won't be sent to round them up or anything.' She then proceeded to explain that the sheep, and the field they were grazing in, belonged to a neighbouring farmer. Jack, she called him – a nice old man, and a good friend, who owned a lot of sheep, and sheepdogs too – collies – three of them – all good workers, well up to looking after his sheep without any *assistance* from me. 'And besides,' she said, 'you're not to go near that road anyway. It's dangerous. Cars and lorries coming far too fast round the corner near our entrance there.' She patted my head again. 'So there you are – the two rules of your new home: keep away from the road and don't go bothering Jack's sheep.'

I could see what she meant about the road. Cars were going past at quite a lick, although they *were* fairly few and far between. Even so, there were more than enough of them for my liking, considering I'd spent all of my life up to then in the back of beyond, where we never saw a motor vehicle of any kind for days on end, and even then it was usually just the postie's van going at snail's pace over the bumps and potholes in the track leading up to old Doddie's house. There was no danger posed to man or beast by traffic up there.

In actual fact, the first traffic, if you can call it traffic, I'd ever seen had been one car, a pick-up truck and a tractor making their leisurely way through the village of Gifford not long after we'd set out from Doddie's place that afternoon. I just happened to be feeling a wee bit travel sick at the time, though, so didn't take much notice of the motorised aspect of Gifford. Or any other aspect of Gifford for that matter, despite Lady B blethering on about how pretty it was and how it was a favourite haunt of local hill farmers and shepherds like old Doddie, and how that pub there was where they all usually gathered and got plastered (whatever that meant) every Saturday night, although some of them preferred that other pub there. I know she was only trying to make me take an interest in all these aspects of the wider world I was now entering into, but I honestly didn't feel up to listening to any of it just then. As I say, I was feeling a bit poorly and, quite frankly, I really couldn't have cared less about what she was chattering on about anyway. I mean, what interest is a quaint little church here and an old-fashioned village post office there to a pedigree Border collie, for heaven's sake? But all the same, I knew she was only doing her best. Actually, I had already noticed that she was *always* trying to do her best, and I liked that. I mean, you'll probably remember I made that point about my two brothers: you know, about how they worked hard at learning to work sheep, always doing their best to please old Doddie, even showing off to him like idiots while he was busy trying to flog me to Lady B. No, honestly, I really liked that about my two brothers. I honestly did. Sometimes.

But that aside, when we arrived in the market town of Haddington a wee while later (I had thrown up by now, by the way, so was feeling pretty much my old self again), I was introduced to *real* traffic for the first time ever, and the sight, sound and smell of it almost made me throw up again. I kid you not. What I did, though, was to stop looking out the window and concentrate on looking at Lady B's elbow instead. And if you're wondering why I picked on her elbow, it's because it moved a lot less suddenly than that foot of hers on the pedal thing, and I needed something to concentrate on that wouldn't make me regurgitate my Wilson's Dog Meal again. That's another thing about us collies: not only are we super-intelligent, we're also very good at thinking our way coolly and calmly out of tricky situations by concentrating on things like elbows, while lesser breeds would keep gaping out at the traffic until they puked.

So, I'd have no problem following Lady B's advice about the road next to Cuddy Neuk. I'd already made my decision about keeping cars out of my life anyway, as I think I mentioned before. But keeping away from sheep – well, that was a different matter entirely. The thing was, while I was dead against being forced to *work* with sheep, I really enjoyed having fun with them, and I'd learned that they liked having fun with me too. OK, I admit not all of them enjoyed a game of 'Tig' like those two orphan lambs I told you about, but even the older ones I'd sent scattering all over the hillside appreciated the taste of freedom I'd given them, and they wouldn't have had that taste of freedom if I hadn't defied all orders to the

contrary. It was all a product of having fun, and I had a hunch farmer Jack's sheep would also be up for a caper when the time came.

But the time wasn't now. Lady B had set the ground rules, and I had no intention of breaking them. Not until I had settled in properly at any rate – and even then I'd make sure it was on the q.t. The thing is, patience is a virtue, and that's another quality collies have in abundance. How else do you think they can bear lying about for ages in a fly-ridden clump of heather waiting for a huddle of dozy sheep to make a wrong move? No, the right opportunity to give some of Jack's flock a treat would come round soon enough, but in the meantime I'd behave like the obedient dog my new human partners wanted. Well, as far as my independent nature and freedom of spirit would allow, that's to say.

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– THREE –

THE STRANGEST THING happened when I met the Boss for the first time. Lady B had only just finished giving me her pep talk on the dangers of the road and the need for me to resist all temptations to introduce myself to farmer Jack's sheep. She had also pointed out that, unlike the boundless expanses of the Lammermuir Hills I'd been accustomed to, the land hereabouts was divided into distinct fields, with those beyond our own boundaries belonging to neighbours, who wouldn't necessarily welcome an uninvited 'guest dog' on their land. I was still in the process of trying to adjust my mindset to this unexpected curb on my freedom when a tractor came chugging into the yard.

'Time to meet the Boss,' Lady B told me, then added with a wily wink, 'Well, we like to let him *think* he is, anyway.'

The tractor's cab door opened and down jumped a tallish young man wearing work-soiled dungarees and a broad smile. 'Well, well, well,' he said to Lady

B, 'who have we got here?'

She glanced down at me with a look of self-congratulation, reminding me of an old ewe that had just given birth to triplets. 'This is Jen, bought at a bargain price from old Doddie's school of champion sheepdogs, where she earned top marks in ... well, in being a *free spirit*, according to the principal himself.'

The Boss gave a little laugh, the type of laugh that said he approved of what he had been told, and with a glint in his eye that said he also approved of what he was looking at. And it can honestly be said the feeling was entirely mutual. I liked the look of this human. We were on the same wavelength, and I instinctively knew, as with my initial inkling about Lady B, that we'd get along just fine. All dogs of any intelligence, but collies in particular, are able to judge a human's character in an instant. Don't ask me how. It's just a gift of nature, I suppose – something that's in us, and I've never seen the need to think more deeply about it than that.

What I did do then, though, was make a quick comparison between the Boss and old Doddie, with particular regard to the training of dogs and the bearing this might have on my future in terms of what could loosely be called 'work'. You may recall old Doddie's golden rule was that, to successfully train a dog, the human had to establish early doors that he was smarter than the dog; that the trainer had to have, in his words, 'more between the lugs' than the trainee. Of course, it hadn't taken me long to figure out – and prove – that this assertion became no more than a puff of hot air wafting over the hillside when

the trainee turned out to have appreciably 'more between the lugs' than the trainer.

Drawing from this experience, I swiftly appraised the Boss's potential as a dog trainer, and came to the conclusion that it would be, in all probability, on the debit side of mediocre, at least when having his wits pitted against mine. And this wasn't because I judged him to be less intelligent than I was – not *particularly* so at any rate – but rather because I sensed that he regarded me as a creature of no less worth than himself. Here at last was a human who thought my way, and I liked his attitude.

So, there I was, standing opposite the Boss with this favourable judgement of his character already established in my mind, when this strange thing happened: the strange thing I mentioned a bit earlier...

'Hello, Jen,' he grinned. 'Well, you're a *right* bonnie lass, aren't you?' He sort of bent forwards a little and beckoned me to go to him. 'Come on – come and say hello. I won't bite you.'

Why he said that, I don't know. Maybe he thought I looked a bit nervous and was trying to make me feel at ease. But even though I wasn't feeling in the slightest nervous, I started to do something that may have given the impression that I was. It was something I'd never done before. Very strange. And to make it even stranger, I did it automatically, unintentionally, yet probably appearing to the onlooker as if it was what I *normally* did on such occasions. What I found myself doing was sort of crouching down, while creeping towards the Boss. All right, I know it would have looked absolutely normal if I had been trying to

put the hypnotic fix on a mob of wayward sheep, but when introducing myself to a human who regarded me as an equal being ... well, that didn't show me up in the right light at all.

And as if that weren't weird enough, I also found myself smiling an involuntary smile, with the lip of one side of my mouth raised to reveal a perfectly spaced line of razor sharp teeth. It was the type of snarly face I'd make to warn my brothers to back off, to stop bothering me, if they were acting like idiots, which they usually were, except when trying to impress old Doddie with their working 'talents'. But I wasn't trying to put the frighteners on the Boss. Quite the opposite, and fortunately for me he seemed to realise it.

'Well, that *is* a lovely smile you've got there, Jen,' he said, smiling himself. 'But, hey, no need to *coorie doon* like that. I won't hurt you.' He popped his fingers a few times and added reassuringly, 'Come on – come and say hello.' Then he did what I would later learn was what many humans do when they want a dog to come to them: he gently patted his chest with the palm of one hand. 'Come on now – there's a good girl.'

Apparently, some people choose to convey the same message by patting their knees, but I knew nothing of such odd practices back then. So, taking the Boss at his word, I duly launched myself upward towards his chest and, for some inexplicable reason, performed a simultaneous back flip to land belly-up like a helpless baby in his arms.

'Wow, neat trick, lass!' he laughed. 'Where'd you

learn that one?'

I wasn't familiar with the word 'trick' at the time, so didn't realise how inappropriate it was when related to a dignified young lady like me. Consequently, I showed no reaction, though taking the precaution of committing the word to memory for future reference.

But for the moment, I actually felt quite chuffed with myself. Clearly, the Boss had been favourably impressed by my impromptu display of acrobatic agility, and Lady B added to my elation by grinning broadly while stepping forward to 'tickle my tummy', as she said. I hadn't experienced that sensation before, but I liked it. A lot.

'She obviously puts a huge amount of trust in your ability to catch her in mid air,' she told the Boss. 'A lot more than I would!'

It crossed my mind that it might well have knocked the Boss flat on his back if Lady B *had* tried the same stunt, but I stifled the notion. She *was* quite slim, after all, and couldn't help it if her human frame wasn't as well suited to such acts of nimbleness as a collie's. But then she made a remark which I found somewhat demeaning and hurtful.

'*Phew!*' she sniffed, swiftly withdrawing her tickling fingers as if she had just touched a stinging nettle. 'You're a wee bit pongy, aren't you, pet? Fur a bit matted too. Hmm, a bath is called for, methinks.'

'Not a bit of it,' the Boss chuckled as he placed me back on all fours. 'She's fine. Let her settle in a while before you think of anything like baths.' He ruffled my head. 'You smell nice, don't you, Jen? Just the way a working dog should.'

There were two elements to that statement: one I agreed with, while the other I took exception to. I most certainly did smell nice, a lot nicer than Lady B and all that fake-flowery scent of hers, but I wasn't at all happy about being called a *working* dog. As much as my initial impressions of the Boss had been good, I realised then that, if our future relationship was to get off to a positive start, I'd have to make an effort to enlighten him on my proper function in life. But not a problem. I was well up to the task.

Then Lady B made another comment to the Boss that irked me even more than her previous one. 'You know, I've been thinking: rolling over on their backs is actually a sign of submission in dogs – showing they feel subservient to you. And I'm sure that'll even apply to the flying version Jen just did.'

What on earth was she talking about? Big words, but it wasn't too difficult to work out what Lady B was driving at. *Submissive*? *Subservient*? *Me*? Oh, no, no, no, I didn't like the sound of this at all. Those descriptions may well have been correctly applied to dogs in general, especially to numpties like those work-happy brothers of mine. But to *me*? No way! But then I thought – hold on a minute here. No point in cutting off my nose to spite my face, to borrow another of those queer expressions humans like to use. Short-lived though it had been, that tickling-my-tummy experience had been really enjoyable. I'd never been treated to such a sensation before, and wouldn't have minded being treated to it again. Soon ... and often. And if this whole episode amused the Boss as much as it seemed to, then maybe *pretending*

to be submissive occasionally wouldn't be such a bad idea after all. Yes, that was it: I'd adopt the flying back flip as my own special 'trick' and perform it for the Boss every time I felt in need of having my belly rubbed. You bet I would, and if Lady B didn't feel comfortable about doing that little favour for me, I was pretty sure the Boss would be only too pleased to oblige.

So far so good, and the outlook was about to get even brighter...

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I WAS ALREADY quite used to seeing young animals and birds: lots of lambs, of course, and puppies too, with the occasional baby hare, a few grouse and partridge chicks, and even some ducklings at one of the little ponds you find here and there in the hills. But I hadn't come across young humans, so didn't know what to expect when the Boss and Lady B told me I'd be meeting theirs any minute now. Sure enough, just when all the excitement of my flying back flip had died down, a car drew up at the gate and out clambered two of what the Boss said were 'boys', which I immediately took to be juvenile *males* of the human species. The clue was in the smell, you see. Oh yes, a very interesting point, which I'll return to later. Anyway, the boys came hurrying towards us with expectant grins on their faces.

'That's not a boxer!' objected the smaller of the two, coming to a sudden stop and frowning. He turned to his mother. 'Thought you said we were going to get

another dog like Muffet.’

‘That’s right, and this is her – Jen.’

The boy’s frown deepened. ‘Doesn’t look like Muffet.’

‘That’s because she’s a collie,’ said the larger boy, as he knelt down and gave me a hug. He leaned back and smiled at me. ‘Yes, and a really bonnie one too, aren’t you?’

The Boss patted the smaller boy on the head. ‘We told you we were going to get another dog, but that didn’t necessarily mean another boxer. Collies are great dogs too, and Jen will be just as good a pal as Muffet was – you’ll see.’

The smaller boy looked up at his father, then at me, then at his mother. ‘And she’ll play with us? Just like Muffet did?’

Lady B tousled his hair. ‘You go and give Jen a big cuddle. Let her know you’re her friend. She’ll never forget it. Believe me.’

The little lad did his mother’s bidding, and I licked the smile that was already lighting his face. Then I did the same to his brother. Although I didn’t know the meaning of the words ‘Muffet’ and ‘boxer’, I could tell from the way the boys were behaving, and from their thoughts more than anything, that they were hoping I might be the one to take the place of a dog that had meant a great deal to them: a dog that I sensed had recently died. That was all I needed to know. Once more, I was well up to the task, and wouldn’t let them down – ever.

I sealed the pact by standing on my back legs, draping my forelegs over the boys’ shoulders and

nuzzling my head against theirs. It was my off-the-cuff attempt to emulate the ‘hugs’ or ‘cuddles’ the boys had given me. Although it was a ritual I wasn’t familiar with, I’d quickly cottoned on to it being a show of affection on their part, and I couldn’t have been more keen to return the compliment.

The Boss and Lady B then introduced me formally to their sons by telling me their human names. But I’d already decided that I would think of them simply as Boy One for the larger of the two, and Boy Two for the smaller. I hadn’t a clue about how to tell the age of humans – not in terms of their conception of time anyway – but I found out in due course that Boy One was about seven years of age, while Boy Two was something like two or three years younger. This made me, as a one-year-old collie, about the same age in human years as Boy One, but of course I was already much more advanced mentally than he was. He’d have no cause to worry, though: I’d be careful not to make him feel inferior.

But getting back to the point I made about there being no need for me to be told that ‘boys’ were males: I said the clue was in the smell, so let me explain...

I’ve already referred to a dog’s amazing sense of smell (particularly a collie’s), which I assure you is in a different league from a human’s. It’s so superior, in fact, that you wouldn’t be able to understand the extent of the difference, even if I could put it into words. Which I can’t. Nobody can. However, it may help you to appreciate a little better what I’m about to tell you if I say that, to imagine what even an average dog’s sense of smell is like, a human would

require eyesight to match the optical power that old Doddie claimed for 'his dugs', which was to be able to tell what brand of cigarette a man was smoking on a hillside some thirty miles way. More than that, you'd have no trouble in seeing through his trousers to identify the colour and material of the underpants he was wearing, who might have worn them before him, where he bought them, and how long ago. That puts a dog's sense of smell roughly into context for you.

You can take it, therefore, that I had already formed a fairly comprehensive assessment of the boys' personal details a couple of seconds after they'd alighted from the car. Bear in mind that my only previous experience of any human had been old Doddie, and I had already deduced from my brief contact with the Boss and Lady B that Doddie's smell wasn't typical. Well, to be fair, in one underlying way it was. I'm talking about the *natural* scent of human skin, which a dog can easily distinguish from that of, say, a sheep, or another dog, even when that scent is masked by the likes of Lady B's perfume, hints of tractor fumes on the Boss, or the whiff of sheep dip and pipe tobacco on old Doddie.

But the most obvious clue to the boys' gender was the one odour they *did* share with both Doddie and, to a lesser extent, their father: an odour, crucially, that wasn't apparent on their mother. In short, I had established from the initial waft emanating from the boys that, while they didn't smoke a pipe or work with sheep dip, they *were* prone to indulging in Doddie's most distinguishing habit. Farting.

Yet there remained an element of confusion in my mind as regards the absence of this smell on Lady B. Was its absence common to all human females, or only to Lady B? Or, for that matter, was it merely being overpowered in her case by that fake-floral perfume of hers? There were too many things happening on that first day at Cuddy Neuk for me to give much thought to the matter, but as the years passed and my familiarity with humans increased, the veil of uncertainty gradually lifted.

Now, as I relate this account after a long and informative life, I can categorically assure you that any woman who claims never to have dropped the occasional quiet one in her knickers is not only a unique member of the human race, but is also a truly exceptional mammal. Yes, and women should be aware that those 'silent' ones they let go in company aren't as silent as they think. Not to a dog anyway. And don't try and pass the buck by blaming us either. We know the routine – a demure cough behind your hand, while casting an accusing glance at the family pet. Talk about devious! But the truth is out, ladies. You've been rumbled, and you can count yourselves lucky if the next dog you try and frame has the good grace not to reveal all by standing in front of you, nose in the air, sniffing, then howling in distress.

But there I go digressing again. Let's see, I was talking about my first meeting with Boy One and Boy Two, wasn't I? That's right, and what I was going to tell you was that we clicked immediately. You see, they made no attempt to disguise the fact that enjoying themselves was their priority in life, and

just in case I might have been in any doubt about it, they wasted no time in inviting me to have some fun.

‘Game of football, Jen?’ beamed Boy One. ‘Know how to play football, do you?’

‘Let’s go, Jen!’ chirped Boy Two, clapping his hands together and nodding towards a large area of neatly mowed grass at the side of the house. ‘Come on ... you can be on my team!’

I’d never heard of football, but it didn’t take me long to learn the basics. Actually, I’m being over modest again. To be absolutely honest, a few seconds watching the boys play for my benefit was all I needed to fully grasp the rules. Pretty simple, really. And considering I’d never even seen a football up to then, I can claim without fear of contradiction that I showed in a flash that I was a natural player, being much better suited physically to mastering the required skills than the boys themselves.

I mean, I twigged right away that the idea was to use your feet to control the ball. Hence the term ‘football’. OK, I got that easily enough. Also, I quickly gathered from the boys’ demo that the object of the game was to get the ball away from the other player and run away with it. And if you managed to take the ball up to one end of the ‘pitch’, as they called it, one player jumped up and down, flung his arms in the air and yelled with joy, while the other slouched around mumbling to himself. Pretty pointless, I suppose, but the boys enjoyed it, and the sense of fun was infectious.

So, I got stuck into the action with a vengeance and immediately showed how being a dog gave me a

distinct advantage over humans. You see, while they were limited to controlling the ball with their two feet (Boy One told me 'dribbling' was the technical term for this manoeuvre), I was able to use four feet *and* my nose to achieve the same result. As you can imagine, I dribbled better than they did, and a lot faster too.

You should have seen me go! Honestly, I was so fast I almost surprised myself, and not only when going in a straight line either. The thing is, I quickly got bored of dribbling the ball up to one end of the pitch and then the other. And the boys weren't skilled enough to do anything about it, even though I let them join forces to 'team up' against me. That's when I really started running rings round them, dribbling the ball between their legs then heading off at speed to leave them floundering about on the ground. More than that, I did all this while keeping up an incessant barrage of barking. No wonder the boys were impressed. Fair enough, I knew I wasn't playing by the same rules they had sketched out for me at the kick-off, but it was for their own long-term good to learn that there wasn't a rule yet made that I couldn't or wouldn't break. Still, I had to give both of them credit for taking it all in good part. They even stood and cheered every time I won the ball and darted away to 'score' at whichever end of the pitch I fancied.

'*FOUL!*', they roared, or '*CHEAT! PENALTY!*'.

Yes, they were *really* good sports, the boys, and very magnanimous in defeat as well.

'You're some dog, Jen,' Boy One puffed as the

three of us lay panting on the grass at the end of the game. ‘Muffet never played that way!’

‘No, and – and anyway,’ little Boy Two chipped in between gasps, ‘I thought you were supposed to be on *my* side!’

Well, I could understand that the wee chap was a bit disappointed, but taking both boys on at once had been my way of trying to even things up for them: to redress the imbalance of pitting human against collie, you could say. Anyhow, I gave his face a big lick to let him know I hadn’t taken offence at his remark. After all, he *was* very young and obviously had a lot to learn about football ... and collies.

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