

## ANIMAL SHELTER

A Dog Story  
By Karl Milde

### Chapter 1:

Big Ben lay on the floor of the cage and dozed. There was nothing much else he could do in the confined space, except to exchange sentiments with the dogs in the nearby cages. When he heard Eric bark for attention, he raised his head. Eric was the German Shephard dog in the cage opposite his.

Ben, a huge St. Bernard with long brown and white hair, had been roaming free, confused as to his whereabouts. A small boy walked up to him with a happy smile and held out his hand. “Come here, doggie. Here doggie.” Ben took only a couple of tentative steps in his direction, but even that was too much. The boy looked startled and backed away to the safety of his mother who stood watch. “He looks *mean*,” the boy said anxiously, holding onto her skirt.

The mother eyed Ben suspiciously while grabbing the boy’s hand. Ben took two more steps toward them, hoping to gain their trust. The mother turned and walked away, pulling the boy with her to the safety of other mothers with small children. She took a black object from her purse, poked at it several times with her finger, and held it up to her ear.

Ben stood where he was, not wanting to alarm the boy and his mom, and wondered what to do next. He knew he was lost, away from his home and his master, and had no idea how to get back.

Soon after, a man ran up and stopped when he saw Ben. He crouched down to Ben’s eye level and stuck out his hand which held some kind of treat. Ben sniffed at it from where he stood but could not tell what it was. The man dropped the treat on the pavement and backed away slowly. He seemed friendly, so Ben stepped forward, carefully watching the man as he did so.

He approached the treat, keeping his eyes on the man, then looked down for a second to see what it was. Before he knew it, the man sprang forward and grabbed him by his neck. Ben struggled to back away, but the man held fast and quickly slipped a collar over his head. Ben knew he was caught and didn’t resist. It was better to go with this man than to roam around not knowing where he was. The man clipped a leash to the collar and together they walked to his car.

Ben felt fear for the first time when the man opened the rear hatch of the car and lifted him in. He found himself in a cage where he could smell the odors of fear from other dogs who had been caged there. The man unhooked the leash and closed the hatch, leaving Ben trapped inside. He then walked to the front, started the engine, and started driving.

The man stopped the car at a dirty brown, one-story building and went inside while Ben watched from inside the cage through the car window. A few moments later he came out, joined by a rather corpulent, pleasant-looking woman with her gray hair in a ponytail. They were talking as

the man opened the rear hatch of the car. He heard the woman say, “We keep a dog for a month. If its owner doesn’t come, or if the dog is not adopted, we put the poor thing to sleep.”

The man hooked the leash to Ben’s collar and said, “Come on now. Jump out.” Ben hesitated a moment, then did so. To Ben it was a jump into the unknown. The woman with the ponytail took the leash and led Ben into the building. The man followed and stood silent while the woman wrote on a sheet of paper and took Ben’s picture. The man scribbled something at the bottom of the sheet, then left.

“Follow me,” the woman said in a kindly voice. Taking the leash again she led Ben into a room with a shiny steel table. The room had a very strong smell that reminded Ben of the fluid his master used to clean his fur. The woman shouted something and a man appeared out of nowhere. He helped her lift Ben onto the table, then stood by while the woman examined him from head to tail. She looked inside his mouth, then in his ears, and finally examined his fur, spreading the hairs and looking carefully at his skin. Ben liked the feel of her parting his hair and remained perfectly still. When she was done, she gave his fur a quick rub and the man lifted him from the table and carefully lowered him to the floor.

The woman took the leash once more and took Ben through a door to another room of the building. The instant they came out, he heard the sounds of many dogs barking. There were all housed in cages, with one dog to a cage.

The cages were arranged in rows with pathways between them. The cages were two high, with large cages on the bottom and small cages on top. Deep-throated large dogs, housed in the large cages, made truly menacing sounds as Ben walked by. What Ben disliked most, however, were the ear-piercing yaps of the smaller dogs in the upper cages. He walked straight ahead looking neither left or right until the woman stopped and opened the door of an empty cage on the lower level.

“In you go,” she said and, before Ben could resist, pushed him in and closed the cage door. “I’ll get you some water and a bowl of dog chow.”

The barking continued until the woman walked away. Then all the dogs suddenly stopped, as if waiting for Ben to say something.

## Chapter 2:

We humans don’t know it, but dogs do think, and they can speak to each other. We know their sense of smell is at least ten times as keen as that of any human and their hearing covers a range of frequencies we humans can only detect using sensitive microphones. This extraordinary amount of information that is received and processed by their brains has caused dogs to evolve in a different way than humans. Because they cannot create a variety of vocal sounds as humans do, dogs communicate simply by simply *thinking*. They can teleport their thoughts, like Bluetooth or wi-fi, to whatever other dog is in the vicinity. Their system of communication is better than wi-fi, in fact, in that they can transmit a greater distance.

They know that humans are unable to “hear” them, so they don’t even try to talk to their masters in this way. Some dog owners do insist they can hear their dogs, but that’s not the case. The reverse is true, however. Dogs can usually sense whether a human is a friend or a foe. Notwithstanding this ability, albeit somewhat limited, to hear what humans are thinking, Ben had been fooled by the dog catcher into believing he was a nice man who would take him home. Now he found himself cooped up in a cage barely big enough for him to turn around.

Ben spoke, addressing all the dogs in the compound. Translated from Doggish into English, he spoke to everyone who could hear him, “Hi everyone. My name’s Ben. I was outside my home this morning when I spotted a butterfly. I followed it, but I suddenly didn’t know where I was. A man found me, and I was fooled into thinking he was nice. I jumped into his car because I thought he would take me home. Instead he brought me *here*. What is this place? Why is everyone in a cage?”

Ben’s speech was greeted with stone silence by the other dogs. He looked about, but because of the steel barriers between the cages he could only see the dogs in those cages directly across from his own, on the opposite side of the pathway. Looking across, he saw a German Shephard dog, standing alert and glaring at him with stern, steely eyes. Feeling uncomfortable with the stare, Ben looked away and lay down on the floor of his cage.

The woman with the pony-tail returned with bowls of food and water. She opened Ben’s cage and placed them inside. She rubbed his big ears and gave his head a friendly pat, then closed the cage door and walked away.

Ben remained sprawled flat on the floor of the cage and soon dozed off. It had been a long and stressful day and he felt suddenly weary. In his dreams he was in an unfamiliar city, completely alone and completely lost as he wandered about a maze of streets. Darkness was falling. He was hungry and, above all, thirsty.

He was startled awake by a single, loud, sharp bark, like the crack of a gunshot. He raised his head and again saw the German Shepherd, standing erect in his cramped cage and still staring at him.

“Is there a problem?” Ben asked, still half asleep since he’d only taken a very brief nap.

“Yeah, of course there’s a problem,” the German Shephard said. “We’re being held here against our will. We’re prisoners.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” replied Ben. “This place doesn’t seem so bad. It’s better than wandering around outside for a day or too. That nice lady brought me some water and a meal.”

“You like being in that cage?”

“This is just temporary. When my master finds out I’m missing, he’ll come and take me home.”

“Are you sure about that? You sure he can find you?”

“Of course, I’m sure.” Although he said that, Ben realized he was not certain at all. This worried him. He tried to stay positive. “What’s your name?” he asked cheerfully.

“Call me ‘Jake’. Since you’re here, I need to give you ‘The Talk’.

“‘The Talk’? What talk?”

“We are all in this together,” Jake began. “We’re cooped up against our will. You won’t be here very long before you realize you’d rather be out there, begging for food, than in a cage that’s hardly big enough to turn around in.”

“It’s not so bad here,” Ben countered.

“Really? Well if that doesn’t scare you, this will: There’s a time running on every dog here. It has been running since his ‘Start Date’ and will continue until....”

“His Start Date?”

“It’s the date a dog came here. He’ll be put to sleep if he’s still here in a month from this date.”

“Oh.” Ben gulped. “You mean, for me that’s one month from today?”

“You got it. You have exactly one month. For most dogs here, their Start Date was already some days ago. Let me explain: Years ago, before the idea of a Start Date came to be, all the dogs here made a Pact. They agreed to do whatever they could to help those dogs become adopted who were here the longest. Before the Pact, it was every dog for himself. When someone came by to look us over, to choose a dog they’d like to take home, it was ‘Pick me! PICK ME!’ There was a competition – a life or death competition I should say – to be the one that is chosen for adoption. Naturally, some dogs lost out. There are always some who aren’t handsome, or cute, or cuddly. Not all dogs are, you know. Ugly dogs never have a chance.”

“What happens to them?”

“The lady will come and take them away, exactly one month from their Start Date. They’ll never come back. It’s so sad...tragic even, when that happens. We all feel it. We’re in mourning for days after that.” Jake lifted a paw to wipe a tear from one eye. Ben felt a pang in his throat and looked at him. He didn’t know what to say.

“But then the dogs here all made the Pact,” Jake continued, his voice softer now. “The dogs that were here for the shortest time agreed to help those dogs who were here longer to become adopted.”

“Did the Pact work?” Ben asked, with some trepidation. “I mean, did it save lives?”

“It worked wonderfully,” Jake replied, somewhat proudly as if he’d invented it himself. “I can tell you, not a single dog has disappeared that way since they made the Pact some years ago.”

“Oh! Well, that’s wonderful. Whoever dreamed up this Pact must have been brilliant.”

“Why, yes. She was a Golden Doodle named Lucy, and she was brilliant in more ways than one. She not only came up with the idea, but she was able to convince all the dogs here at the time to participate. To make the point, she stayed in her cage a full thirty days before she decided to allow a poor family with young children to take her home.”

### Chapter 3:

Ben was stunned. He wished he could have been there at that time to get to know Lucy. After a moment, he finally found his manners and asked, “Can I join this Pact? What do I do?”

“You’re here, aren’t you? Consider yourself a member,” Jake replied.

“That’s all well and good. But what should I actually do?” Ben asked again.

“The next time someone comes here to get a dog, don’t let him take you. Be *nasty*. Growl. Nip at the guy’s hand if he reaches for you. Or be *crazy*. Keep turning around in your cage, chasing your tail like you think you can catch it. Make a weird-sounding howl. That’ll do it. Or you can just be *lazy*. Most of us do that. Lie down, curl up, close your eyes, and don’t look up even if the person talks to you. The person will end up taking another dog. It works every time. You’ll see.”

“But what if my Master comes for me?”

“Well then, all bets are off. Go home with your Master. That’s part of the Pact too. A dog’s family is his priority,” Jake said firmly. Then added, “By the way, that happens a lot.”

Ben felt relieved, but at the same time he was troubled. “Are there any dogs who have been here almost a month?” he asked.

“I’m sorry to say. We’ve been working together to save this one poor guy. His name’s ‘Tuffy’. He’s a scruffy-old, grumpy bulldog who’s been here going on twenty-nine days. If he’s not chosen by this time tomorrow, his life will be over. He’ll be the first dog we’ve lost since the Pact began.”

“We can’t let that happen!” barked Ben, energized now and more than ready to take on the challenge.

“Yeah well, there’s not much we can do unless someone comes along who needs a dog. Tuffy will make a trusty and loyal companion for some very lucky person, but that person has to show up here first.”

“Can I meet him? I mean Tuffy?”

“Sure. You’ll meet him. Tomorrow. The lady who runs this place lets us out in the yard every day. We get a chance to meet and talk with everyone. I’m sure there’ll be some kind of good-bye ceremony for Tuffy because, whether he’s chosen for adoption or the fat lady comes and takes him away, that’s the last time we’ll see him.”

Ben thought deeply about this, and he suddenly became tired again. He lay down and went to sleep.

When the light finally filtered in through the overhead windows the next morning, Ben was wide awake. Overnight he had devised a plan to save Tuffy, if and when it came time for the woman with a ponytail to take him away. He wanted to talk the plan over with Jake but he would go ahead with his plan anyway, even if Jake didn’t approve. After all, Tuffy’s life was at stake!

He waited until he saw Jake open his eyes, just a crack. “Jake, you awake?” he whispered.

Reluctantly, Jack pushed himself up onto his rear haunches. “I wasn’t. But I am now. What’s going on?”

“I have a plan to save Tuffy.”

#### Chapter 4:

“Yeah, right,” Jake said dryly. “Get somebody to adopt him.”

“Suppose nobody does?”

“That would be bad for Tuffy. Really bad.”

“I know. I know. But we can still save his life.”

“There’s no way.”

“Once the woman lets us out, we’ll guard Tuffy. We won’t let her get near him.”

Jake stared at Ben as if he’d lost control of his senses. “And how do you suppose we do that?”

“We’ll all stand around him. If she tries to get close, we’ll growl.”

“That won’t stop her. She knows we won’t bite.”

“We may need to nip her, just a bit. To show her we’re serious.”

“You do that and she’ll take *you* away, even before she takes Tuffy.”

“Not if we’re all in this together. She can’t take everyone.”

“Hmm.” Jake thought for a moment. “You know,” he said. “That just might work.” He thought some more. “Then what do we do with Tuffy?” He shook his head. “No. There’s no way we can set him free.”

“Once this woman realizes she can’t win, she’ll let Tuffy go.”

Jake looked at Ben dubiously. “I guess it’s worth a try,” he said somewhat reluctantly.

“And here’s the thing: If Tuffy’s caught again and brought back, he’ll get a new Start Date. He’ll have another month.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Rules are rules,” Jake said. “They apply to her too.”

Ben could see Jake was beginning to like his idea. “We can enforce them,” Ben said. “We’ll have strength in numbers.”

Ben was interrupted by the woman walking past pushing a cart with a bag of Purina Dog Chow and water jugs. He couldn’t see her after she passed by, but he heard her open cages and provide each dog, in turn, with food and water. He couldn’t help feeling a bit awkward about his plan to rally the dogs against her, but saving Tuffy was paramount.

The woman eventually reached his cage. She opened the door and refilled his bowls with a healthy supply of light brown pellets and with water. Ben remained calm and watched her work. When she was done she rubbed his ears and patted his head. “Good boy,” she said, then closed the cage door and turned to feed Jake.

It was late morning before she was finished and began the process of letting all the dogs out. She opened the lower cages, one by one, allowing the dogs to step out and head to the door leading outside. She lifted the small dogs from their upper cages and lowered them to the floor, allowing them to scamper out too, following the big dogs. As prearranged, Ben and Jake remained in their cages until the other dogs had gone. Jake nodded, signaling Ben to follow him, and they walked out through the door into the sunlight.

“Which one’s Tuffy?” Ben asked, looking around at the many dogs, some walking to exercise their limbs and some socializing with others.

“I don’t see him.” Jake replied in a concerned tone. “Give me a minute.” Jake left him and ambled inconspicuously through the crowd. He came back, his face resigned. “He’s not here! We’re too late.”

Ben felt like bursting into tears, but dogs can’t do that. However, he was devastated. “She didn’t let him out!” he said. “Quick, let’s go back. He must be still in his cage, or maybe she’s....” He whipped around and ran back toward the door with Jake right behind. “Which one’s his cage?”

Jake didn't know, so they dashed back and forth in the pathway, calling to Tuffy. There was no answer. Ben and Jake were heartbroken.

They went back to the yard to tell the other dogs.

The loss of a dog was unprecedented and everyone they spoke to was stricken with grief. Ben knew what was going through their minds: "That could happen to *me*. Suppose I'm not adopted..."

He and Jake finally came upon an older dog who sat by himself near the fence in the far corner. When they gave him the news, they were startled at his reaction. "Oh, you've got that all wrong," he said slowly with a sly look on his face. "Tuffy was adopted this morning.

### Epilogue:

Ben and Jake both took a breath. They were so relieved and so happy for Tuffy. In thinking about the adoption, Ben felt certain that Tuffy had found the right home. He had been passed over by many people who were looking to bring home a dog, but whoever it was who chose him must have understood and appreciated what solace and friendship an older dog can offer.

The very next day Ben's master finally found him. He had been frantically looking for him everywhere and eventually realized he might have been caught and brought to the shelter.

Ben was dozing in his cage, exhausted from the emotional roller coaster ride he had just experienced, when the woman with the ponytail appeared, followed by his master. Ben had heard the footsteps and opened his eyes. Seeing his master, he felt his heart leap and skip a beat, and he jumped to his feet. If dogs could smile, he would be grinning from ear to ear. Instead, he did what all dogs do when they are supremely happy: He wagged his tail furiously and stuck out his tongue.

When the woman opened his cage he jumped up into his master's arms and licked his face.

Remembering his manners, Ben returned to his senses and turned to Jake, who was standing in his cage, watching him welcome his master. Jake responded by wagging his tail too.

His master took notice of this and asked the woman, "Is he available for adoption?"

"Why, yes. Most of these dogs are. Would you like to take him home too? Your dog has clearly made friends with him and could use a companion."

"Yes, I'd like that," the man said. "If they can get along together, having two dogs is even better than having one."

The woman stepped over and began to open the cage. As she did so, Jake shrunk back as far away as he could in the small space and lowered his head. "No, no," he said to Ben in Doggish. "It's not my turn, you know. Other dogs have a Start Date earlier than mine."



Ben looked at him with tears in his eyes. He knew what Jake meant. He would give up a chance to be adopted and be taken home with him because of the Pact, which was for the welfare of all the dogs in the shelter.

Ben turned back to his master and did what dogs do when it's clear they want to say something in Humanish, but can't. He looked in his master's eyes and tilted his head. His master looked back at Ben and he knew what Ben was saying. Somehow, he knew.

“Hold that dog for me,” Ben's master said to the woman with the ponytail. “I'll come back for him when it is his turn to leave.”

THE END