

Shelby's Story

A Dog's Way Home Tale

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There are just a few things I can remember about my earliest days.

Of course, there was my mother. At first I could not see her, but I could smell her and feel the comforting heat of her body beneath her thick fur. My mother was warmth and safety and milk that filled my stomach and left me sleepy and content, curled up next to her.

I could hear noises, too. Sometimes there were sharp yips or squeaks. Sometimes a bang that made me twitch, even in my dreams. There was a rattling, clanking sound that I heard regularly, and a little trickling noise that never went away.

I found it all so soothing. The trickling sound, my

mother, and the comfort of furry bodies sleeping close together.

That was how everything started.

After a few days, my eyes opened and I was able to stay awake longer than before. I began to learn things.

I learned that my mother was big and short-haired and white, with a wet nose and a wide, blocky face. Her tongue was long, and strong enough that when she washed me with it I fell over.

I had brothers and a sister, too! That came as something of a surprise. They were the source of the little yips and squeals that I heard. They were part of what kept me warm, too, so I liked them, even if they did step on me quite a lot.

Two of my brothers were white, just like my mother. Another was brown, black, and white in patches. My sister was brown and black with a tiny splotch of white on her chest—just like me. In my mind, I named her Splotch.

The trickling noise that I heard night and day came from a long, twisty hose that lay on the ground. Water ran out of this, dripping into a metal bowl. Sometimes my mother went over to take a drink from the bowl. I didn't bother, though, and neither did my littermates. Milk from our mother was all we needed.

The bang that I heard so often came, I discovered, from a house nearby. Twice a day, a door in that house

would open and a person would come down a few steps into the yard where we lived.

The door would slam shut behind her with a sharp, loud sound and the person would shuffle forward. She'd put a bowl full of brown stuff down on the ground near our mother and then return inside the house.

She was the first human I'd ever seen. Frankly, I didn't think she was very interesting. She never stayed to talk to us or pet us, so I decided she was not someone I had to care much about.

When she put the bowl down on the ground, my mother would get up, sometimes shaking off a puppy or two, and walk over to it. Then I would hear that clanking sound once again. It came from the chain that was attached to my mother's collar. The other end of that chain was connected to a long stake driven into the ground.

When my mother moved, the chain clanked. When she shook her head or stretched, the chain rang with a harsh music. When she settled down again, the chain was quiet.

My mother would put her nose in the bowl and gobble up the brown stuff inside. When my legs grew a bit stronger, I sometimes went over to sniff at it, but it never smelled very exciting to me. I didn't see why my mother liked it so much.

There were lots of other things in the yard that were

more interesting than a bowl full of brown chunks. As I got older, I was able to learn more about them.

Dandelions, for one. They were fuzzy yellow circles attached to strong stems. They did not taste very good, but when I bit at them they bobbed and danced on their stems, and that was almost like a game.

Sticks, too! Sticks were everywhere. And sticks *did* taste good, especially as my teeth started to come in and I could gnaw off bits of bark.

The other good thing about sticks was that my brothers and sister wanted them' too. That meant, if I had a stick and they didn't, it was time for a game called I've-Got-the-Stick-and-You-Don't.

I *loved* that game!

My sister was especially good at playing it. My brothers wanted to remain closer to my mother's side, but if I had a stick Splotch would chase me until I dropped it and she could snatch it. Then it was my turn to chase her.

What a marvelous thing to do!

Day by day, Splotch and I grew stronger, and our play took us all over the yard. We played other things too. There was Chase-Me and I'm-the-One-On-Top and Look-How-Fierce-I-Can-Be. All of them were delightful games, and after we were done we'd run back to my mother for a meal of milk and a good long sleep.



This was my life until the day the door banged open and the human lady put down a bowl for my mother and also a tray full of dark-colored goop. My brothers and Splotch and I *loved* that stuff! We licked it and chewed it and stood in it and rolled in it. I ate it from the tray and my feet and Splotch's face. Glop was the best! I still went to my mother to nurse, but more for comfort than hunger, now that my siblings were covered with glop and I could snack anytime I wanted!

One day after I'd licked Splotch's face clean of glop and she'd licked mine, we began to wrestle. Splotch shook me off, and I rolled and kept rolling until I bumped up against something I'd seen but never thought much about.

The fence.

It was the first time I'd really examined the fence. It went all the way around our yard, and it was made of chilly wire that did not taste good. I know, because I tried to bite it.

Splotch came over and chewed on my ear, trying to get my attention. But I shook my head so that she fell over, and kept sniffing at the fence.

Something had caught my attention.

On the other side of the fence I could detect a new smell. And it was very, very interesting.

Later I would find out that the smell I'd encountered here, for the first time, was called a piece of chicken.

I didn't know that then. All I knew was that my tail began springing back and forth even faster than my nose was twitching.

I was growing fast in those days, and my brothers and sister were, too. I ate as much glop as I could before it was all gone, but I was still a little hungry all the time.

The brown stuff in my mother's bowl was starting to smell interesting to me. And this thing on the other side of the fence smelled a little like the chunks in that bowl . . . but better. Much, much better. So much better that I licked my lips.

I put my nose down to the spot where the fence met the ground and sniffed harder. The delicious new smell was so close . . . only a few inches away. But the fence kept my nose from reaching it.

Spotch had figured out what I was doing. She came to the fence and put her nose right next to mine. She sniffed hard as well.

I pushed at her nose, she pushed at mine, and we discovered something extraordinary.

A hole!

The fence had a gap in it, right where the metal wire met the ground. It was not a large hole. My mother would never have been able to fit through it. But when I lay down flat on my tummy and wiggled and pushed with my back feet, I could shove myself through it.

Now I was on the other side of the fence. And the thing that smelled so good was right next to me on the ground!

I grabbed at it, but it slipped out of my teeth. Splotch had wiggled through the fence behind me and she grabbed at the treat as well, but the same thing happened to her. We were not used to chewing yet, and our jaws were not strong.

But we didn't give up. We both nibbled and licked at that piece of chicken, and after a few more tries we each ripped off a tiny mouthful that tasted marvelous. I gulped and it slid right down my throat into my stomach, and that made me anxious for more.

In a few minutes the chicken was entirely gone and my sister and I were both licking at the greasy spot on the grass where it had lain.

From inside the yard, I heard a sharp, urgent bark. It was our mother. I looked up and saw her standing as close to the fence as her chain would let her get. She barked again, and I understood.

I wiggled back under the fence, with Splotch following, and ran up to my mother, tail wagging, trying to tell her what a wonderful adventure I'd had. She sniffed me all over and did the same to my sister, and then she nudged me until I lay down with her.

I had a good sleep, close to my mother and litter-

mates. But I didn't forget what I'd found on the other side of the fence.

That bit of wonderful food stayed on my mind as my brothers and sister and I continued to grow. My mother stopped nursing us, turning away from the sharp little teeth we'd all sprouted. Which meant I was on glop-only. Which should have been fine except there never seemed to be enough! I always wanted more. When I curled up to sleep at night, my stomach sometimes growled as if it were angry at me.

That hole in the fence drew me back time and time again. Was there more food outside? More of that wonderful piece of chicken? Maybe even something . . . better?

Better than chicken? I drooled at the thought. I *dreamed* about it.

I would lean against the fence and sniff. Once I even squirmed through. But there was no more chicken on the ground, and I couldn't smell any nearby. Or anything else to eat.

My mother barked a warning, and I wiggled back through the fence to cuddle close to her and be licked and sniffed.

But my stomach growled loudly at me that night. It wanted to be fed.

The next day, I returned to the hole in the fence.

Splotch came with me. I put my head into the hole and sniffed, while my sister tried to climb on my back.

I didn't smell more chicken. But I smelled . . . something.

It was a *big* smell. That was the only way I could describe it to myself. It combined dirt and grass and water and small furry animals that moved quickly. Included in this smell were other dogs and people and dust and wind and harsh, smoky odors that came from the cars that went up and down the street near our yard.

It was the smell of the world outside our yard. And that world must have more food in it. Somewhere in that world there would be another piece of chicken. Or maybe just more glop.

I did not want to leave my mother. Part of me wanted to stay in the yard, playing and wrestling with my littermates, sleeping close to my family's warmth.

But the smell of the world called to me. It seemed to pull me through the hole in the fence.

Splotch fell off my back, and I wiggled and pushed with my back legs. The hole seemed to have gotten smaller since the first time I tried it, which was strange. It was a tight fit, but I still managed to squeeze through.

Splotch followed me.

I looked back and saw my mother sitting where she always sat, attached by the chain to the stake in the

ground. She tilted her head and watched me. But this time she did not bark to call me back.

Maybe she knew about the world and how big it smelled, even if she could not go with us. She could not fit through the hole, and her chain kept her in one place.

But I thought she might understand about the chicken. I thought she knew it was time for Splotch and me to find it. Or whatever else there might be.