

OSCAR'S STORY

I don't know exactly when it happened, but I was a little over a year old when my family stopped paying attention to me. First, they stopped teaching me tricks, then they stopped throwing my ball and playing with me. Finally, they just ignored me all together.

I did my best to get their attention. I sat up like they taught me and quietly begged at the door. I ran around in circles pretending to chase my tail. Then, when it started to rain, I dragged all the patio cushions up to the back door and chewed the tags off the back seams. That did get me attention. The wrong kind. For all my good intentions, I got spanked and shamed.

"Why don't they love me anymore?" I asked myself. "What did I do wrong?"

I hoped it was just a phase and in time things would be back to the way they were and we'd be a family again. For days I patiently waited by the door with my rubber hot dog and put it down at their feet when they came outside.

"Not now," they would say. "Go lie down and be a good boy."

"You always say that," I replied but my barks all sounded the same to them.

Once I realized this was how things were going to be, I thought up ways to occupy my time. I started digging holes in the back yard but I was no competition for the gophers and squirrels and soon became bored with that exercise. I begged the neighbor's cat to play but she wouldn't forgive me for chasing her up the tree during my puppy hood. During the day I alerted my family to every noise and on moonlit nights I sang to the moon.

Early one morning I heard the trash truck, the street sweeper and a police car siren all within a few minutes of each other. I peeked through the fence slats, wishing I could see better. Then it came to me—if I could jump high enough, I could sit on the top of the gate and watch everything going on.

That very afternoon I started jumping exercises. Every day I pushed myself to jump a little higher. It was the first day of the second week of Jumping 101 and I had just finished running around the yard several times to warm up. I stared at the gate, flexed my muscles and psyched myself up for the first jump. “You can do it,” I barked and put everything I had into the jump. When I saw the top of the fence slats, I reached out my paws and grabbed them. Panting, I pulled my back legs up and straddled the slats. “You did it!” I congratulated myself. “You really did it.”

I was watching the comings and goings and thinking about how much fun it would be to run from house to house, to smell all those trees and bushes when the neighbor’s cat jumped off the roof and landed on the gate in front of me. She screamed like a banshee and reached out to swat me with her paw. When I ducked, I lost my hold and fell over into the front yard.

I hit the ground with a bone-jarring thud that knocked the wind out of me. Once I caught my breath, I realized that the cat had done me a favor. I hadn’t planned on jumping over the fence but now that I was over, I was glad. In fact, I was better than glad. I was overjoyed. I turned and stared down the street, at the long row of houses that all looked alike, the green lawns, the dozens of bushes and trees. My ears stood up like a Jack rabbit when I saw a fire hydrant.

I ran over to it, hiked my leg and marked it as my own. From that point on I was like a crazy dog, running from yard to yard, sniffing and marking every tree and bush.

“I’m free,” I barked. “I’m free do to anything I want, go anywhere I want. I won’t be bored or lonely ever again.”

The day passed in a blur of activity. I sniffed so many new scents that my nose got stuffy. By late afternoon, I started to get hungry and decided to go home, grab a bite from the automatic dog feeder, and gear up for the next round, but when I turned and looked back, I didn’t see anything I recognized.

It hit me then--I was lost.

I wandered around until dusk trying to find my own scent so I could retrace my steps. I was heading for a fire hydrant when I got cut off by a big Shepherd mix.

“Beat it, kid, this is my hydrant.”

“Who are you?”

“Name’s Shep. Who are you?”

“I—ah— I don’t think I have a name. Can you help me find my way home?”

Shep shook his head. “Wouldn’t even know where to start. Maybe you’ll get lucky and your people will go the distance to find you.”

“Whattayamean, go the distance?”

“You know, make some phone calls, post some signs, send out some emails. That sort of thing.”

“That sounds like a lot of trouble.”

“Yeah, but if they love you, they’ll do anything to find you.”

Shep’s words hit me like a fifty pound bag of dog food. “That’s the problem.

They don't love me. They probably don't even know I'm gone."

"I hear that a lot out here," Shep snorted. He started to walk away then motioned me to follow. "Come on, kid. I'll teach you what you need to know to live on the streets."

I hung with Shep until dark when he lay down in an alley behind a dumpster. I settled close by. "What happened to your people?" I asked.

"They dumped me when I was just a pup."

"Oh," I said. "I'm sorry. It must be hard growing up on the streets."

"It was tough at times but I had me a mentor—a terrier named Spike. He taught me the ropes like I'm gonna teach you. The first thing you gotta know is to watch for the dog catcher. If he picks you up and takes you to the shelter, it's curtains."

"Maybe he'll take me home," I said.

Shep shook his head. "You got no tags, kid. Betcha ain't micro chipped neither. So there ain't no way to find your home."

I spent a long sleepless night listening to dogs barking, cats fighting and owls hooting.

At dawn Shep and me headed over to the park and raided the trash cans. It was slim pickins and I was still hungry so Shep snatched a hot dog out of a kid's hands and we ran away and ate it in the bushes.

Two weeks later we were still roaming the streets of Bakersfield and we weren't the only ones. There were dogs everywhere, dogs who had been dumped by their owners, lost dogs like me and runaway dogs.

Each night I prayed that my family would find me and take me home. I vowed to be a good boy and do whatever they wanted.

One day Shep and me wandered into a front yard where a man was working on his truck. “Where’d you two come from?” he asked, bending down and motioning us over. Shep started to back away but I was drawn to the guy, probably because he looked a lot like my owner.

“Come here boy. Let’s see if you’re wearing tags.” When I didn’t move, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a piece of beef jerky. The smell pulled me toward him like a magnet. It tasted so good I forgot to share with Shep.

The guy laughed. “You’re a cute little fellow. Too bad your owners didn’t have enough brains to buy you a collar and tag so I could take you home.”

The guy pulled out a second piece and offered it to Shep. When Shep refused to come to him, he set it down on the ground.

“Okay, boys, follow me. There’s more food in the back yard.”

“He’s too nice,” Shep said, always the skeptic. “I don’t trust him.”

“You don’t trust anybody,” I told him. “Come on. I’m still hungry.”

We followed, we ate, we drank, we slept and we dreamed we were beloved pets with all the toys we could play with and not a care in the world.

I awoke to the sound of men talking.

“They’re both nice dogs,” the guy who took us in said. “What will happen to them?”

“We’ll check to see if they’ve been micro chipped or tattooed and then we’ll put them in a holding area for four days. If their owners don’t come for them, they’ll go up for adoption and if no one adopts them in a few weeks, they’ll be put to sleep.”

“I told you I didn’t trust that guy,” Shep said, then growled low in his throat.

The next thing I knew we were in the dog catcher's truck.

"I don't understand," I whimpered. "I thought the guy liked us and wanted to keep us."

"This is the big one, kid. Better say a prayer."

I heard the barking before I ever saw the shelter. The rumors on the street were true—there were dogs everywhere, two, three, four to a cage—big dogs, little dogs, fat dogs, skinny dogs, young dogs, old dogs, handsome dogs and ugly dogs.

They put us in a cage, gave us food and water, and left us alone. I felt Shep shivering next to me and knew then that he wasn't nearly as tough as he pretended.

After four days we were put up for adoption. Sometimes someone would stop at our cage and look at us, but then they'd leave and we wouldn't see them again. Every day a staffer would take five or six dogs out of the cages and walk them across the yard to the sleeping place. The rest of us would bark as loud as we could to say goodbye.

"I wanna go home," I cried as I stood at the cage door. "I never should have jumped that gate. I should have stayed where I was."

"I'm sorry, kid. I should've followed my instincts and stopped you from going up to that guy."

"It's not your fault," I told him. "It's just the way things are. People don't care what happens to dogs. They don't think that we love and fear and hurt and mourn. They throw us away like yesterday's garbage. They dump us and think we'll be able to fend for ourselves. They don't take the time to teach us what we need to know to be good pets and good companions."

“Not all people are like that. I know some dogs whose owners treat them like family. They take them places, play with them, even let them sleep in their beds.”

“Those are some lucky dogs,” I said, then lay down and put my head between my paws.

Neither one of us slept very well that night. Though we didn't talk about it, we knew time was running out and pretty soon someone would come and take us to the sleeping place.

“Hey you two,” a familiar voice woke me from my nightmare. It was the guy who'd turned us into the dog catcher. He had a leash in his hand and a big smile on his face.

“The shepherd or the Yorkie?” asked the staffer with him.

“The shepherd,” the guy said, then opened the cage and took Shep out.

“You're going home with me, big guy.”

Shep's tail wagged so hard I thought he'd wag it off.

“Wolf, wolf,” Shep said, which meant, “I'm being adopted. I'm going to have a home!”

I ran up to the front of the cage, hoping the guy would take me too. He smiled and scratched my head. “I wish I could take you but I can't.” I sat down and hung my head. “You'll find a home. Just be patient.”

“Wolf,” I said. “Goodbye Shep. Be happy.”

After Shep left, I resolved to make myself invisible so the shelter staff would forget about me. I curled up at the back of the cage and didn't make a bark. I listened to

the dogs around me and knew that my story was not unique. It seemed a lot of people bought puppies because they were cute, then once they grew up, they ignored them.

I woke up to a woman staring at me. Thinking she was a staffer and that my time had come, I started to shake and whimper.

“You poor little thing,” she said. “Why would a cute little guy like you end up here?” She signaled a staffer over and had me taken out of the cage. “Phew,” she said. “He stinks to high heaven.” She took me from the staffer and looked me over from head to tail. Then a miracle happened and she said, “I’d like to adopt him.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. Without thinking, I licked her face. She looked shocked and started to laugh.

An hour later I was being examined by the vet. He listened to my heart, looked in my eyes and checked my teeth. “He’s filthy but he seems to be in good health.”

After the vet, the woman took me to a groomer, who gave me a bath, cut my hair and trimmed my nails. “He’s a handsome little guy,” the groomer said. “What’s his name?”

“I’m going to call him Oscar--Oscar de le Hoya because he’s a fighter and he so handsome,” the woman said, then picked me up and held me tight.

She took me to her house and introduced me to other dogs, all of them rescues like me, each with his or her own sad story about how they came to need a home. There was Mighty Mouse, a Chihuahua, who spent four years in a cage, taken out only to breed. Oolie, a Chiweenie, whose fireman owner took him to the shelter because he was moving to another town. Pele, a ten year old Rat Terrier, said his owner died and no one

wanted an old dog. Ginger, a 13 year old Doxie mix, told of how she was to be put to sleep because one of her people had a stroke and the other couldn't deal with her. Missy, a 7 year old blonde Chihuahua, whose owner kept her in a bedroom all day while she worked and then got mad at her because she pottied on the floor.

Living on the streets had done things to me. Where I used to be independent, now I was insecure and afraid. When my new owner was out of sight, I worried that I'd lose her or she'd lose me. She said I was suffering from separation anxiety and took measures to protect me. She had me micro chipped and bought me a study collar and an identification tag. I'm never allowed outside after dark alone and when I go places with her, she puts me on a leash.

My new owner and her husband gave me all the attention I could handle. They constantly picked me up, held me, cuddled me and played with me. I learned to wrestle, to play hide and seek, to fetch toys and drop them at my peoples' feet and to bark for a biscuit.

A month after my adoption my new family decided to go camping. They hired a pet sitter to watch all of us dogs. They were all packed and ready to go when I heard the woman say, "We're going to take Oscar with us because I'm afraid he'll jump the fence and come looking for us."

I didn't think I'd like being away from home after my recent experience but my new owner held me in her lap all the way to the campground. Once we arrived, she put me on a long leash so I could explore. I was shocked when I sniffed the big metal box that she called a "bear box." If a bear was half as big as its scent—whoa!

My people and their friends teased me about being such a good camper and

started taking pictures of me. I sat when they said to “sit”. I stayed when they said to “stay”. I rolled over when they said, “roll over.” Then they started dressing me up and taking me places just so they could take my picture. They bought me my own tent and fishing pole and laughed about the book they were going to write about me—Oscar Goes Camping.

Today, I’m laughing too. When I’m not doing a photo shoot, you can find me at home with my people family and my feline and canine family.

I was one of the lucky ones. I didn’t go to that sleeping place. I found a new home—a forever home.

Each night when I go to bed I pray for the unloved dogs, the ignored dogs, the abused dogs, the dog on the streets, in puppy mills, the dogs owned by hoarders and the dogs in shelters. I also pray that anyone who reads my story will open their heart and rescue a dog in need of a home.

Yours truly,



Oscar