



Connie B. Looson

*Short Stories*  
For  
*Animal Lovers*  
*Based on fond memories*

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[loosontheworld@gmail.com](mailto:loosontheworld@gmail.com)*

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## Bessie

**B**essie was my first, true, *Love At First Sight*. There aren't many things I remember from that time in my life that weren't shocking in a Scarred For Life kind of way, so having these vivid, scent and texture-filled moments is a healing counter-weight.

She arrived like clockwork - every second day. I would be waiting impatiently; carrot gripped to warmth in my small hand. I remember the dash down the drive. The skidding to a halt (me). The long, gentle release of breath, (her), as she lowered her head to graciously accept my offering. Who got more pleasure from that carrot, I wonder, all these years later?

She was a towering figure, that black-maned, baker's delivery horse. I could stand comfortably between her front legs, and I remember the feel of her whiskers as she gently snuffled at my hair. The sweat on her belly and legs was sweet to me; a perfume like no other for a fledgeling horse-crazy four year old.

Bessie would wait patiently while I gripped her legs; politely ignoring the bucket of water my mother had kindly carried on my behalf, which was sitting invitingly close by. (It probably weighed as much as I did at the time, otherwise, I know that I would have wanted to carry it myself). I couldn't wait to see her dip her lips into the cool water. She was a working horse after all, and I was filled with a strange sense of satisfaction and pride to know that we were the people who lived in the house where kindness waited.

In that child's way, I took for granted her quiet, motherly energy. She allowed me to wrap my arms around her russet brown face, press my cheek to her long nose, and kiss her velvet-soft muzzle as often as I liked. As I write these recollections, I'm struck with the knowledge that Bessie's visits were my first, and probably best, therapy sessions. That utterly safe place wasn't available to

me at home. Inside that house, love had a way of being tricky and came with conditions that I was still learning to navigate. Bessie was the safest love I'd ever encountered, (apart from our Border Collie, Peter. He was my True North in the rocky waters of domestic terror. I guess it's easy to take your siblings for granted sometimes).

I can recall running my hands along her belly, stroking those bony legs which seemed to have been dipped in a black that faded to brown as it reached towards her shoulders.

My mother would chat companionably with the driver, who exhibited a saintly patience while I indulged myself for as long as his round would allow. Could he ever know how gratefully I think of him even now?

Years later, my mother recounted to some 'horsey' people of an incident that must have been trapped in the rose-coloured dream catcher that was my infant mind. As she spoke, images filtered through in flashes and moments.

We had gone on a two week holiday (of which I have no recollection, of course). What I do remember is the excitement of the imminent arrival of our bread when we finally returned. Bessie was surely on her way! My ears were tuned for the clip clop of metal shoes on bitumen. I was staked out by the front window, carrot in hand, and eyes peeled. Before the driver had come to a stop I was tearing down the drive, then coming to the respectful slower pace I'd been taught as I neared.

I was certain that she was just as pleased to see me, and we embraced in that 'face enveloped by small arms' way that we'd perfected. The driver, however, had leapt from the van, shouting to my mother to "Get that child away from the horse!" He was frightened for me, as it turned out. How silly he'd seemed to me. The only part that I found frightening was the possibility that he'd try to drag me away from my friend.

My mother had waved away his concern, which just made him more anxious.

"This is a dangerous horse!" he'd remonstrated; angered by her apparent lack of concern, and ready to pull me to safety.

"But that's Bessie, isn't it?" she'd asked him. He wasn't our usual delivery man.

He was flummoxed. Clearly she knew the horse. Clearly I knew the horse. But it was still hard for him to watch as I stood between her front legs, hoping to stay out of his reach.

"They'll never believe this," he'd told her, shaking his head. He pointed at the quiet bay who nobly ignored the rest of the carrot in my hand, and instead allowed me to stroke her beautiful face.

“At the bakery we have to draw straws to decide who’s going to put her in harness. She’s a nasty piece of work; bites and kicks like you can’t imagine. The guy who usually works with her is on holiday.”

Then he laughed ruefully, as he watched the ‘nasty piece of work’ enjoying having her tummy rubbed. “No wonder I couldn’t get her past this house!” he’d laughed.

If you’re interested in the idea of the bread being delivered by a horse, I’ve attached a link here:

<https://www.adelaidere memberwhen.com.au/when-the-baker-delivered-bread-in-a-horse-and-cart/>

# Monty

I met the sweetest little Void in the world many years ago when I moved to a new home. The woman I was sharing with already had one cat, and had just acquired a little black kitten.

It was my first evening there, and we were getting to know each other a little better.

Her senior cat, a fluff ball of white, was curled contentedly on the couch beside her, sleeping soundly, but the little black-furred being was squirming in fierce resistance on her lap as she tried to stroke him.

“There’s something wrong with this kitten,” she’d complained. “He’s not affectionate at all. I’m trying to teach him to accept me, but look how stubborn!”

I remember thinking that if I were him, I’d be trying to get away too. She was pinning him down while she ran her hands over his head, then body, and he clearly wasn’t enjoying it.

I tried hard to keep my attention away from his plight. It was hard. I was feeling all those sensations of being trapped and the overwhelming strength of the person holding him down right along with him.

When she finally resigned herself and gave up, his squirming paid off. He struggled from under her grip and leapt to the floor, shook himself back into a better shape, then quickly trotted a few steps away.

My heart was breaking for him that he was being so misunderstood.

But, (I’d struggled to remind myself) it wasn’t my business.

*Until it was.*

Monty took one look at me, seemingly surprised by my presence, and froze. I thought he might run from the room. Seeing another potential molester sitting in front of him was probably too much for the little guy, suddenly taken from all he knew, and thrust into unfamiliar terrain.

Instead, he walked towards me in a most determined and calm manner, sat at my feet, and looked up.

“Hi, cute stuff,” I told him with a smile. He was the sweetest little mass of sleek, black shiny fur. The temptation to pick him up was overwhelming, but I knew better than to try. He’d been through enough for one night.

Then to my delighted surprise, he reached up, latched his tiny claws onto my jeans, and clambered his way up onto my lap.

I remember glancing up at my new flatmate while trying to keep a discretely neutral expression. What I saw was unsettling. She was glaring at the kitten with pursed lips. Angry.

Then, she looked up, and I realised that her anger was now directed at me.

Monty, in the meantime, stomped a little circle on my lap and curled up into a purring void.

It was love at first sight.

He would follow me around the house whenever I was home, and I quickly learned to be careful where I placed my feet.

It was a dark old house with a corridor that ran its length through the centre; all the rooms were positioned on either side. Seeing that on most mornings I would leave for work before the sun had risen, walking from my bedroom to the bathroom and kitchen was a case of groping my way along, hands outstretched and skimming the walls. I worried that turning on the light would disturb my flatmate - who, like me - slept with her door open, and in any case it was a horrible thing to do to myself straight out of a deep sleep.

Usually I was only half-awake while getting ready for work, so when that tiny jet-black ninja leapt out and catapulted himself into a flying starfish shadow across my path, I almost had a minor heart attack before succumbing to a fit of the giggles.

He was hilarious. The flying starfish soon became his favourite trick, and every time he managed to surprise me.

I was working twelve hour days for four days a week, then two half days. It was an exhausting job, and I was always tired.

But every day he would come into my room in the early hours of the morning to clamber up onto my bed. I would be secretly delighted, of course, but when you're exhausted sleep isn't just a luxury. In those days I craved it like nothing else.

*Why didn't you just close your bedroom door, you ask?* Well, I think you'll agree that love can make us do strange things.

He was whisper gentle and as quiet as a feather, and I always hoped that he'd just snuggle in close and be content with that. I was rarely granted that wish.

I can still feel the weight of those carefully placed beans as he stealthily made his way along my body, working his way up the blanket.

The cold shock of that little paw when he gently prodded my face. *Are you awake?*

I would be holding my breath, hoping that he'd settle down, but Monty loved nothing better than cuddling with me, and sometimes we'd have long, mostly one-sided conversations. He would follow my voice with rapt attention (until he

was distracted by something dangling within his sight) and reply to questions with a short, squeaky mewl. Mostly he was just a good little listener.

That might be why his next move was usually to place a paw on my lips. He would gently tap, then tap again. *Say something?*

His weight would shift, he'd lean forward, then gently stroke my eyelid. *Open?*

My heart still fills at the memory of that sweet little black-furred angel. It's so much more important than sleep, right? Those lost moments of slumber mean nothing to me now, but the sensation of my heart swelling while Monty showed me his love will stay with me forever.

Then, when no noise escaped my lips, and my eyes remained closed, (and I have to give him credit for his patience) he would pull out all the stops, press his nose to mine and purr for all he was worth. That vibration would go through my head like a slow electric shock, and good-bye any chance of feigning sleep. When I opened my eyes he'd pounce on me, I'd lift the blanket, and he'd dive inside. Some mornings he'd even let me go back to sleep.

He took to following me to the bus stop, which was just a few houses down from ours, and fortunately on the same side of the street. On cold Winter mornings he was barely visible in the dark and I worried that he could be hit by a car. I would beg and plead with him to stay inside, but he, of course, ignored me. There was no point in trying to make him stay at home by shutting him in when I left. The cats had a door flap, and he'd just race to it then be back out the front in a flash.

I'll never forget that little silhouette, a darker shape barely discernible against the pre-dawn shadows. He'd sit and watch the bus as it drove away, and never move, I guess, until it was out of sight.

The first time I found him waiting there for me when I got home, well... *that* can still bring tears.

Eventually I had to leave that place. Monty wasn't mine, and the circumstances leading to leaving weren't exactly conducive to any kind of bargain or price. Monty wouldn't be coming with me.

It still breaks my heart to think of it. I can't remember the last time I saw him. That whole exit is a blur.

I often wondered if he still sat at the bus stop in the evenings, hoping that I'd come home. Did he feel betrayed? Was his heart as broken as mine?

I hope that someday our souls will reunite, and he'll understand. I love to think that I'll get to see him again, we'll have a cuddle and a chat, and perhaps I'll even have his forgiveness.



# Peter

**P**eter was a Border Collie, and anyone who's had the privilege of spending time with one will understand; they are uniquely special dogs.

But I believe that even amongst the best of this special breed, he was a shining star.

I was quite little when our Peter was already a senior dog, but even in his later years he never lost his unflappable patience, and would calmly tolerate me sitting on his back and bouncing up and down while sometimes holding on to his ears.

Those silky, cool black ears.

They are, of course, working dogs, with an intelligence and gentle nature that makes them perfect for their roles. Watching a pair working together, gathering sheep into shapes and forms that from the air resemble schools of fish moving with one mind is nothing short of amazing. Sheep, of course, are not the most intelligent of animals and it's the dogs' job to keep them moving in the right direction without scaring them or causing them harm.

And they make wonderful companions.

I heard many tales of Peter long after he'd crossed that rainbow bridge. As well as having a saintly patience, he was clever and crafty too.

We lived quite close to the beach; just a short walk and then across a long straight road that followed the coast for about as far as your eye could see. It was a perfect place for dogs and kids alike.

My father would usually wake early in order to take Peter for a quick run before he had to head off to work. I'll always admire my father for that. He knew that dogs like Peter have energy to burn, and if they don't get enough exercise, they can come up with all kinds of ways to get into trouble.

Well, Peter got used to the routine. He knew exactly when my father got up, and was ready with his leash in his mouth by the time my dad was dressed.

One morning, dad woke much earlier than usual, and decided that walking the beach in the dawn light would be a wonderful way to begin his day. It wasn't only our dog who enjoyed the bracing, salty wind.

Peter adored the beach. He would fly like an arrow let loose over the soft, white sand to chase the gulls, sending them squawking and complaining into the air. They, in turn, liked to tease him by keeping those orange feet planted on the sand until the last possible moment.

Apparently, even seagulls enjoy playing chicken.

So dad was surprised as he walked out into the back garden that Peter wasn't sitting there with his leash at the ready. Then a movement out of the corner of his eye caught his attention and he turned his head just in time to catch Peter come flying over the side gate. The really *high* side gate. High enough, supposedly, to keep an agile dog in.

Before Peter hit the ground, he saw my father. Dad said he'd never before seen a dog with an expression like it. He was still mid-air but if he could have turned around he would have. His suspiciously wet, sandy paws tried. But his momentum, and the fact that he was still airborne, made his bold arrival on the back lawn a fait accompli.

They stared at each other for a moment, then Peter slunk into a deeply embarrassed and apologetic crouch and sidled up to my dad. Who burst out laughing.

Dad said he tried. He tried very hard to be stern and decisive. But the look on Peter's face did him in.

Peter got a second walk that morning, as, we suspected, he did *every* morning.

# Nanny Extraordinaire

**H**e was a gentle and smart protector, and so our parents had no qualms about leaving us alone with him. In fact, he was the best nanny we could have ever wished for.

When my oldest sister was just a baby, my mother would sometimes take her in the pram to the local deli. It was a nice stroll and the perfect way to enjoy some fresh air.

Mum would leave the pram outside with my sister in it, and tell Peter “Mind the baby.” He took his role in our lives very seriously. He would sit next to the stroller and from all accounts side-eye anyone who approached.

One morning my mother decided that she could carry my sister, as she only needed to place an order, so she left Peter to wait outside and carried my sister in.

Mum apparently got into a long discussion with the shopkeeper and lost track of time. Then suddenly, she and the shopkeeper became aware of the distressed cries of a woman who had shortly before left the shop. They went out to find a policeman - who'd happened to be driving past - trying to reach the handle of a stroller, while the mother wailed frantically that “That dog is vicious! He won't let me near my baby!” The policeman was making a valiant effort, but to my mother's horror, Peter was holding ground, growling like a demented Doberman and showing the teeth of a lion every time he took a step near.

“Peter!” she yelled, horrified to see our gentleman canine behaving like a junkyard Pit bull.

It took her a few minutes of cajoling to finally convince him that it wasn't our stroller. She eventually passed my sister over to the lady and lifted Peter up so that he could identify the resident bawling baby as a stranger.

He was *mortified*.

My mother said that he walked all the way home with his tail tucked so far under, it seemed he'd left it back at the shop. His head hung low, his eyes were cast down, and he stayed back so far behind them all the way back that she began to fear that he would refuse to come home.

When I read that scientists do all kinds of experiments on poor dogs to try to determine whether or not they have emotions, I always think, ‘*You poor deluded fools. You should have grown up with a dog.*’

# Shocking

**M**y parents loved to recount stories of Peter's escapades, and my favourite might be when he tried to save my life. You know how mothers' often say, "It was a bit too quiet."? Well, our mother never usually had to worry about those moments. Peter was a constant and diligent guardian and as I've just recounted, fearless when it came to protecting us.

His herding skills were put to good use once when my mother had a group of young mothers visit with their babies. With all of those ankle-biters at various levels of the crawling stage, one of the mothers was always stationed in the garden to keep an eye on them. Kids had a lot more freedom in those days, and being outdoors was considered to be an important part of helping babies to thrive.

We had a lovely soft lawn, and our back yard was securely fenced, but every so often, one of the little bundles would get up some speed, and distance quickly followed.

My dad came home from work and, noticing the young mother, asked why she wasn't inside with the others.

"Someone has to watch the babies," she replied, certainly thinking my father to be a bit stupid. There were five babies crawling around, mostly ignoring their assortment of toys in their efforts to escape the big picnic blanket in favour of the invitingly soft (and probably tasty) grass.

"But you've got *him*," he said, nodding to Peter, who was watching the babies perhaps even more keenly than the mother.

You can imagine her face.

"Watch," my father told her. He called to Peter, "Watch the babies, Peter."

In my mind, I like to imagine Peter sitting up and giving my dad a salute at this point. He didn't, of course. He did, however, immediately get up and move closer to his little herd of lambs.

As the mother watched, certainly with incredulity, Peter continued to circle those little kids. He expertly nudged, blocked and confounded his little charges until they resigned themselves to obey the fluffy four-legged being who was laying down the rules.

He would crouch down to block a path, crawl forward to re-enforce a boundary, and dad told me that even when the babies piled on him - I mean, big fluffy toy that he was - he took it all in gentle stride.

Apparently from then on, an occasional glance out of the kitchen window was considered sufficient vigilance by the mums.

Peter, I'm sure, was happy to have an important job to do.

So, the life-saving part?

Many years later, when I was about the same age as those little lambs, my mother was in the kitchen preparing a meal when she heard Peter whimpering loudly, then yelping and squealing as though in pain.

She dropped what she was doing and rushed into the lounge room to find Peter trying to drag me out from under the television. He had his mouth latched around my ankle and was desperately pulling at my leg.

He'd caught me trying to put my finger into the electric outlet, and somehow knew - just *knew* - that it was dangerous. His cries weren't from pain. I wasn't poking him in the eye with a toy as my mother had feared. He was crying because he thought he might hurt me.

I truly believe that most of our Guardian Angels come with four legs.

# The Move

**W**e moved quite often when I was young; by the time I was seven I'd already had four addresses. It seems to have become the template of my life, in fact, because the day I turned thirty it occurred to me that I'd had more addresses than birthdays.

It's a widely held belief that moving is one of the most stressful things a person can do - right up there with divorce or bankruptcy. I'm here to say that I can wholeheartedly agree. The general upheaval is certainly hard on your psyche. Are you leaving behind friends and family? Are you moving to a less or more central locale? Will you have to drive a long way to do your shopping, or will you have a loud, busy street right there under your window in this new close-to-every-convenience neighbourhood?

I've lost some possession during moves. I've even had things stolen by the removalists. (Whoever took my beloved Akubra, I hope it gives you a head-ache every time you wear it.)

Unfortunately it's usually a long time before you realise that something is missing, and by then you're out of luck. You know that you're never going to see it again. Bizarre, isn't it, that the intrinsic value of your missing (insert item here) increases exponentially the moment you realise that it's gone?

But without doubt, the worst loss we ever suffered as a family in the process of relocating was when we lost Peter.

My parents were building a new house, and there was a lot of time spent driving between our current and future addresses. Peter, of course, was a part of all the to-ing and fro-ing. I can only imagine how exciting it was for him to meet the builders and explore the strange and wonderful scents of a building site and large new garden area.

For some reason my parents decided the final move might be too much for a dog. Perhaps they worried that he'd be underfoot. A lot of furniture was being moved in, along with a brand new fridge, and the thought of someone tripping over him might have been a solid incentive to leave him at my auntie's place for the duration. It was a two day operation, so Peter was going to be having a sleep-over with his cousin, Candy.

By all accounts, no-one was worried. He'd spent many happy hours playing with his furry cousin, and was considered a part of the family. Everybody loved Peter.

But Peter - with that sixth sense of his - must have realised at some point that we'd gone. *Gone!* I know that he panicked. I know that he took his responsibilities as protector as his life's work. His was the soul of a Guardian Angel.

My dad often said that Peter was too intelligent for his own good. Breaking out must have been the first thing that came to his mind, and he would have found it a simple task to figure out how. At some point in the early hours of the morning, he escaped. He was on a mission to find us; to make sure that we were all safe.

It's awful to think about how far he must have travelled. Was he following scenery previously only glimpsed through the car's window? Picking up scents that informed him of familiar roads? The distance from our old home to the new one was only about twenty minutes by car, but when you factor in four legs, and pads that can only take so much time running on bitumen, the journey takes on epic proportions. On top of that, we'd moved.

*Where was home?*

Then things got even worse. The weather turned. It rained for a few days and nights, and when the thunderstorms hit, I know that my parents must have felt his terror as though experiencing it with him. Thunder was the only thing that could frighten that brave little soul. That, and fireworks. I know that many of you will understand. To a dog, it must feel like the whole world is coming to an end. How can you explain something like thunder to a dog who is cowering in a trembling mess underneath your bed?

To imagine him out there lost and terrified robbed my family of sleep. We'd driven the route between our old place and my auntie's so many times that it seemed impossible that he couldn't be found. Flyers were pinned to power poles on every street. Surely someone must have seen him. Why hadn't anyone called? Had someone taken him in? The thought that he might have found a safe haven must have been a huge comfort, but calls to the Dog Pound and every vet in the area had so far been in vain.

Peter was lost.

My parents rarely - in my young memory- found common ground on which to agree. They were poorly matched, and argued often. We learnt to walk on eggshells in order to keep the peace in any rare moments of calm.

But fear and grief can unite the most combative of opponents, and they loved Peter. His absence held a magical-like power that had them agreeing to anything and everything that might help to bring him home.

But nothing did.

A week passed, then more days of grief and fear. The ringing of the telephone would catapult everyone to their feet, and the race to answer was a moment of suspended breath and pounding hearts. Was it him? Had someone found him?

I think that a lot of those calls were from my auntie. Can you even begin to imagine how she felt? The responsibility of caring for him for two days should never have held so much weight. Knowing that we were all suffering as a consequence of something beyond her control, but nevertheless happened on her watch must have been a terrible thing to endure. Guilt is a useless and toxic emotion when you've really done nothing wrong, isn't it?

Then, late one night, around two weeks since the night he disappeared, my parents were sitting quietly together watching the flames and embers morphing and weaving their hypnotic dance within our new fireplace; silent in their shared pain. Our new home wasn't the dream they'd hoped for. How can you have a happy beginning when you start with a tragedy?

Then they heard a sound at the front door. It was probably the wind. It was a truly unpleasant night out there; icy rain lashed the windows.

Then they heard it again. My father went to see what it was. Was someone on our front porch?

He opened the door, then fell to his knees. There was Peter; as bedraggled and miserable as you could imagine, standing in the shelter of our porch. Rivulets ran freely down his drenched, black coat, then pooled into pink puddles, blending with the blood that flowed from his shredded paws.

They brought him in, all three crying, and swaddled him in fresh towels in front of the fireplace. They fed him, they cuddled him and they cried over his skeletal form. His whimpering continued all through the night, they later told us.

The whole night, swaddled warmly between them in their new bed.



# Thanks for reading

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[Connie B. Looson](#)

