



A DOG  
NAMED  
BLUE

HILARY C.T. WALKER

*A Dog Named Blue*

By Hilary C.T. Walker

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## *A Dog Named Blue*

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Blue chose me. I adored him from the start and was thrilled when he made it clear to his previous owner that he wanted to go home with me that day.

We'd moved to England from Italy but my husband still worked on the Continent. Glen would fly over whenever possible on weekends, but mostly I was alone with our three-year-old son in a centuries-old Cotswold stone house in the middle of twenty-six acres. I did not enjoy my dark walk to the stables for the nightly check on our four horses.

I decided a big dog was in order, a fierce-looking pet. Scouring the ads, I saw a couple of Bull Mastiffs for sale and drove over to see them. They rushed to the wire fencing of their outdoor kennels with *KILL!* written all over their faces. These were no pets!

In despair I reread the paper and spotted a fifteen-month-old Great Dane looking for a new home. All I knew about the breed was that it's huge; curiosity made me dial the number.

His house was the size of a postage stamp, with an even smaller garden, in a crowded neighbourhood. *Whatever possessed his owners to buy such a large dog?* I mused while ringing the front bell. A massive, dark form loomed on the other side of the bottled glass door with a man in tow, who opened the door. Next to his owner stood a very polite, huge Great Dane who looked at me inquiringly. Three feet at his shoulder, he was dark grey with a white bib and two white paws. He didn't make a sound.

When I put out my hand out to stroke his head, the dog graciously allowed me to touch him. As I needed to know how dog and boy would get on, I'd brought my son with me. Ross fearlessly copied his mother, instinctively trusting the animal whose big black nose pushed into the little hand stretching high to touch him.

"Hi, come in," said the man, holding out his hand. "The

name's John Jones."

"I'm Hilary Walker and this is my son, Ross."

We shook hands and followed him into his diminutive sitting room, where Ross and I sat on the sofa and he sat opposite us in an armchair.

"What's his name?" I asked, pointing to the gentle monster.

"Smoky," he replied, then asked anxiously, "What kind of dog are you looking for?"

He fondled the animal's large grey ears as its chiselled head leaned into the arms of his seat. When I told him, he asked, "You just don't want a guard dog, then?"

"No," I admitted, "I want a pet who *looks* like a guard dog."

John was reassured. Then another thought worried him. "Do you have enough room for him to live in the house with you? I really hate to let him go, but we're not allowed pets here. And anyway, this house is too small for him."

"Our house is pretty big and we have twenty-six acres for him to run around in," I explained.

John smiled. "Sounds ideal. But could I check your property before you take Smoky?"

"Of course," I replied.

Then Smoky did something extraordinary. He moved away from John's chair, padded on huge paws over to mine, and turned round to plant his very substantial rear end in my lap, confident I'd be flattered. I was! Pleased as anything at his showing such trust and acceptance of a stranger, I continued talking as if nothing had happened and stroked the tall, broad back of the heavy dog sitting coolly on my legs. I had to peer round him to maintain eye contact with his owner. When I stroked his face, he pressed his wide muzzle into my palm. *You're okay*, he seemed to say. Ross leaned across and cuddled the huge torso—Smoky turned his head in benevolent approval. *You're a good kid*.

Tears formed in John's eyes as he related how well the dog played with his little daughter and how loath he was to part with him. His next home *had* to be a good one. I learned that his particular color is called blue and that Great Danes have small

hearts for the size of their body and therefore a short life expectancy—usually six to seven years. Over-exercise can easily twist their intestines, but they do need a lot of room for wagging their never-ending tails. I was soon to learn Great Danes knock a lot of stuff off coffee tables and shelves, and have heads the ideal height for circling shark-like around the dinner table, looking for scraps.

Suddenly John said, “Look, I can see the dog likes you and I saw your Range Rover outside, so I believe you’ve enough space for a big dog. Why don’t you take him now?”

“Are you sure?” I could see how hard this was for him.

“Yes.”

I wrote a cheque for an obscene amount of money (these big pups cost a lot) and Ross beamed at me. After a goodbye stroke from John, Smoky happily jumped into the very back of the Range Rover. I buckled Ross up in the rear passenger seat and drove off, after assuring John he could check on us any time. A forlorn man looked out of the tiny home from which he’d released a beloved pet.

Two seconds into our trip Smoky decided the back of the car wasn’t his scene, and gave an enormous leap over to sit next to Ross. This was a big improvement, the cheeky dog clearly thought, as he leaned across my son and stuck his bull-sized head out the window.

I watched the huge nose and fluttering ears in my wing mirror. *What have I done?* I asked myself in horror. *Supposing this animal kills my son? What kind of irresponsible parent am I?* But Ross thought it was funny. He giggled at the furry bulk looming over him and I stopped fretting.

When we got home I let Smoky out, somehow knowing he wouldn’t run off. After one look at our grass fields, he gave a joyous yelp and bounded off to race round in humungous circles. He was a terrifying sight—his huge jowls flapped up and down with the lumbering movement of his body to reveal long, pointed fangs. When he’d exhausted himself and I was remembering John’s warning about knotted intestines, he lunged at me in gratitude for bringing him here and knocked me over. It

was a great start to our relationship and a reminder to have him castrated ASAP.

Another change I made to him was his name.

He was definitely a smoky colour, but *Smoky* was too weak for a dog as strong as I'd just found out he was. Since his color was blue, he became *Smoky Blue*, which quickly shortened to *Blue*.

It then occurred to me my pseudo guard dog hadn't once barked. How was he going to ward off would-be burglars? Maybe that was the real reason his owner had sold him? But it was too late now—I was in love and the dog was staying.

Blue needed to meet the horses, who would be a big part of his life. He was almost a year and a half old and unfamiliar with animals larger than himself, so I wondered how this meeting would go. He followed Ross and me up to the barn where four equine heads poked over their doors to inspect the newcomer.

If I'd been concerned he couldn't bark, I needn't worry any more. He nearly brought down the barn with the reverberations! He had no idea what to make of the horses and appeared dreadfully threatened. Trouble was, there were too many of them for him to know which head to bark at first. So he stayed at the far end of the aisle to let them *all* know that he had a Very Loud Voice.

The horses blinked in surprise—who did he think he was? Did he really hope they'd be scared? Forget it! Soon they went back to munching their hay and I took Blue back outside to recover from the shock to his ego.

It took him a while to get used to the large equines, but when he did, he thoroughly enjoyed romping around the countryside with me whenever I went on a trail ride. His big party trick was to rush down the drive ahead of me as I rode home and hide behind a bush. He'd leap out in front of the horse I was riding and frighten it. The horses never got used to it—that made his day.

Having now discovered he could bark without being reprimanded, Blue would practise early every morning. He'd sit in the pasture like a monarch and echo across the valley to

rouse lazy stragglers in the neighbouring village. Eventually I had to ask him for more considerate timing and frequency, and he duly obliged.

Ross's formal English education began when he was four, the following fall. His school was on rugged open land called Minchinhampton Common. I'd take Blue with me in the afternoons to fetch Ross and all three of us would go for a walk. The September weather was warm and the blackberry bushes full of fruit. After picking copious amounts, we sat on a rustic bench picnicking together while Blue rummaged among the interesting smells of local wildlife.

One afternoon in late autumn, we set off across the Common towards a sun slung low in the red streaked sky. Ross and Blue (the Great Dane never needed a leash) walked side by side while I followed behind, watching the little boy whose head barely rose above the big dog's withers as they strode along in companionable silence. We were climbing a hill and the line of its crest looked like the start of the sky. Ross turned back and shouted to me with a big grin, "Look, Mummy! Blue and I are walking to the edge of the world!"

He'd described the scene exactly. I stood still and drank in the beauty of it.

Boy and dog were now on the brow of the hillock, etched against the sky with long shadows falling behind them. The sunset's wide orange and crimson veins flowed slowly across the horizon, softly lighting a path for the intrepid adventurers setting out to conquer earth before nightfall.

I shall never forget that beautiful tableau—a magic moment suspended in time, given to me by the loving Great Dane. Thanks to him, my fast-growing son is engraved forever on my mind as an innocent four-year-old enjoying the company of his canine buddy, whom he trusted completely and who was his constant playmate through the ups and downs of that first year at school.

Blue was to experience much excitement and give us many wonderful memories. He was only three years old when crippling arthritis took away the fun in his life, forcing my difficult

yet necessary decision to end his suffering.

I wanted him to die peacefully in the home where he was so loved. When the vet came, Blue was snuggled down on a blanket, in his favourite place next to the white Aga oven in the kitchen. His tummy was warm with a grand last supper of steak and rice, and the huge animal gave a long sigh as the swift injection freed his soul from his pain-racked body. He left behind a legacy of love and loyalty, and the enduring gift of my son's boyhood on the Common with him, lit by the gloaming.

In the corner of an English field lies a beautiful blue Great Dane with the biggest heart God ever gave a dog.

THE END

## ABOUT HILARY C.T. WALKER

Hilary Walker is an American citizen, English by birth, who lives in Maryland with her three horses, three dogs, schizophrenic house cat, normal barn cat—and abnormally wonderful American husband and teenage son.

Her short fiction has won and placed in national competitions in the U.K. and the U.S. and her non-fiction appears in three anthologies: *Horse Crazy* and *Horse Healers* published by Adams Media and *A Prince Among Dogs* published by Revell. Her novel *Brittle Diamonds* is available in online bookstores.