


opening extract from

# Woof!

written by

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# 1

# *This Happened*

There was once a boy who turned into a dog. This doesn't happen every day. If it did, the world would soon be short of boys and overrun with dogs. What's more, it would hardly be a story worth telling. It would be like: There was once a boy who had his breakfast; or: There was once a boy who walked down the road. Luckily – for story-tellers, at least – that isn't the way of it. There are common happenings in this world, and uncommon. So . . .

There was once a boy who turned into a dog. The boy's name was Eric Banks; he was ten years old. The dog he turned into was a Norfolk terrier.

Eric Banks was a quiet boy, most of the time: 'steady worker', 'methodical', his school reports said. He was the kind of boy who didn't make a rush for the back seat of the bus, or go mad when the first snow fell. He was left-handed, right-footed and rather small for his age. He had freckles.

Eric lived with his parents and his little sister; her name was Emily, she was three. His dad was a postman; his mum had a part-time job in a shop. Eric himself had a paper-round which he shared with his friend, Roy Ackerman. (Actually, he was too young to have the round. It belonged to his

cousin. But she had broken her arm, and Eric's dad was a friend of the newsagent ... so, Eric was standing in.)

Eric first turned into a dog a little at a time in his own bed. His parents were downstairs watching television. His sister was fast asleep in the next room. The time was ten past nine; the day, Wednesday; the month, June. Until then it had been a normal day for Eric. He'd done his paper-round with Roy, and gone to school. He'd had two helpings of his favourite dinner. He'd played with Emily before tea, and Roy after. He'd watched television, had a shower and gone to bed. Now he was *in* bed and turning into a dog.

It happened like this. Eric was lying on his side with his eyes closed. He was almost asleep. Suddenly, he felt an itch inside the collar of his pyjama jacket. This – although he didn't know it yet – was the fur sprouting. He felt a curious tingling in his hands and feet. This was his hands and feet turning into paws. He felt his nose becoming cold and wet, his ears becoming flappy. Eric opened his eyes. He didn't panic straight away. This was his nature, partly, but also he was still half-asleep. The thought in his mind was: 'I'm turning into a dog!'

That was another thing about Eric: he was a good guesser. When Emily first learned to talk, it was usually Eric who guessed what she was trying to say. He could guess the mood his teacher was in, just from the way she held her hymn-book in assembly. Now – on the evidence of a furry paw where his hand should have been – he guessed he was turning into a dog. He didn't suppose he was turning into a *werewolf*, for instance, which is what Roy Ackerman

would have thought. He didn't suppose he was dreaming, either, which he was not.

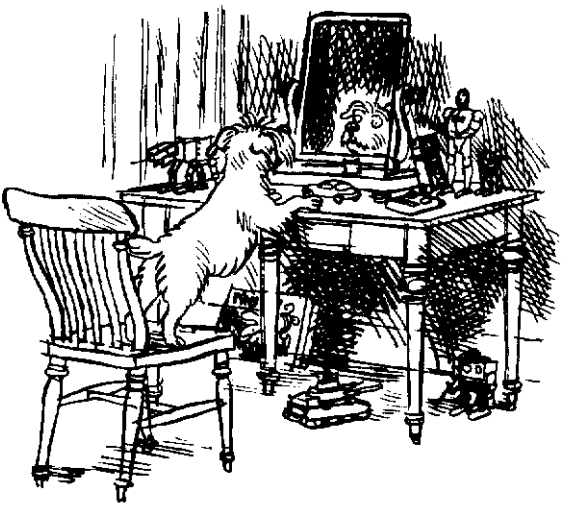
The time it took Eric to turn into a dog – his shape blurring and rippling like a swimmer under water – was about fifteen seconds. The time it took him to become frantic was about five seconds after that. His first action was to begin scrabbling in the bed, trying to get a better look at himself. His thoughts were in a turmoil: 'I'm a dog! A *dog*!' The next thing he did was try to get out of bed. This wasn't easy for a dog in pyjamas; besides, they were baggy on him now. Eric leapt, and landed in a heap. He kicked his way clear of the trousers and backed out of the jacket. He resisted the urge to growl when one of his claws got caught in a buttonhole. He sat on the floor and thought: 'I'm a dog!'

It was now a quarter past nine. The last of the evening sunlight was shining through the green curtains. Everything in the room – furniture and wallpaper, Eric's books and toys, his junior science kit, his clothes laid out on a chair beside the bed –



was tinged with green light. Birds were chirruping outside the window. Next door, Mr Phipps was mowing his lawn.

Eric got to his feet – all four of them – and walked uncertainly across the room. He put his front paws on the dressing-table and stared into the mirror. A furry, rather surprised-looking face stared back. 'I



don't believe it,' he thought, and then: 'I look like a Norfolk terrier.' Eric knew a bit about dogs. He'd done a project on them with Roy in the second year.

Once more Eric sat on the floor. He was bewildered, to say the least. A confusion of questions jostled in his head: 'How could it happen? What's the cause of it? Why me?' He went to the window, put his paws on the sill, ducked his head under the curtain and looked out. Mr Phipps was emptying the grass cuttings onto a compost heap. A whisp of blue smoke

was rising from a bonfire in the next garden along. Eric left the window, and – with no clear aim in mind – nudged open the bedroom door with his head. He went onto the landing. He couldn't see much – it was gloomy – but he could smell all kinds of things. There were biscuit crumbs in the carpet. There was talcum powder. He felt the urge to sniff around. Soon he came upon a chocolate button which his sister must have dropped. She had been eating them earlier that evening. Eric studied the button. At that moment the thought in his mind was: 'Being a dog might not be *all* bad.' And he ate it up.

# 2

# *Shoo!*

Eric sat at the top of the stairs. He had sniffed around for other chocolate buttons without success. He'd been tempted to try his luck in Emily's room – her door was ajar as usual – but decided not to risk it. Besides, the prospects weren't good. Emily dropping her sweets was common; Emily leaving them was rare.

Now Eric cocked his head on one side. From the room below he could hear the television. In the kitchen his dad was making supper. There was a smell of coffee and cold meat. Eric felt his mouth watering, and – all at once – came to a decision: he would tell his mum and dad, that was the thing to do! After all, it wasn't as if he'd done anything wrong; wrong had been done to him.

Eric began to go downstairs. The thought occurred to him: 'I wonder what's on?' And then: 'Perhaps I can stay up, since I'm a dog.' But going down stairs isn't easy for a dog, especially an inexperienced one. Eric found his stomach was dragging on the steps and being tickled by the carpet. What was worse, his back legs kept catching up with his front. On the last few steps he took a tumble, skidded on the hall mat and bumped into the coat-stand. After that, the sitting-room door opened, the hall light

went on – it was gloomy there, too – and Eric's mum appeared.

Mrs Banks looked down at him. 'Charles!' she called. 'We've got a dog in the house!'

A moment later Mr Banks appeared in the kitchen doorway. He saw a worried-looking Norfolk terrier on the hall mat. (Mr Banks knew about dogs. He was a postman, remember.) He crouched down and held out a hand. 'Now then,' he said; 'how did *you* get in?'

Eric peered up at his parents. He was surprised to see how enormous they were. Their feet were huge; their heads up near the ceiling. And he was surprised that they didn't know him. Of course, there was a good reason for this, but even so . . .

Eric advanced towards his father's outstretched hand and began to speak. 'I didn't get in, Dad – it's me, Eric – I've turned into a dog!'

Well, that's certainly what Eric meant to say. It's what was in his mind. However, what came out was just a string of barks and yelps. Eric tried again. It was no use. The trouble was, he had the brains of a boy, the thoughts of a boy, but the vocal chords of a dog. Mr Banks patted his head. It occurred to him that he had seen this dog before. Its expression was . . . familiar.

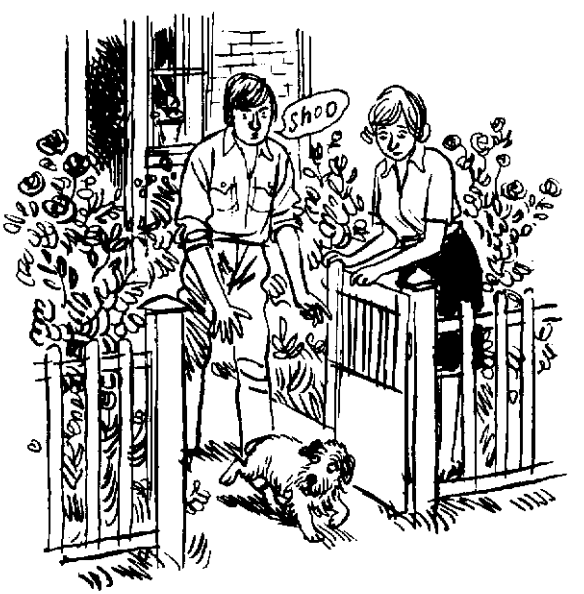
Now Eric, in desperation, began prancing about. He had the idea of somehow *miming* who he was, or at least showing his parents that here was no ordinary dog. The effect was convincingly dog-like. Mrs Banks patted him also. 'It's almost like he was trying to tell us something,' she said. (She was a good guesser, too; unfortunately, on this occasion, not good enough.)

'Yes,' said Mr Banks. 'Perhaps he's trying to tell us how he got in.' He took hold of Eric by the scruff of the neck and began leading him towards the door. 'Come on, out you go!'

Eric didn't like the sound of this. He barked and whined. He dragged his feet.

'Sh!' said Mrs Banks. 'Bad dog – you'll wake the children!'

'I *am* the children,' barked Eric, 'or one of them – or I was!' He struggled on a little longer. Then, sensing the hopelessness of the situation (he could hardly bite his own father), Eric gave up. He allowed himself to be led from the house and down the front path. Mrs Banks went on ahead and opened the gate. Mr Banks pushed him out onto the pavement.



'Off you go,' he said, and clapped his hands. 'Shoo!'

Reluctantly, Eric shuffled off a few steps, then sat down. When his parents' backs were turned, he pushed his head through a gap in the fence. He watched them as they returned to the house. He heard his mum say, 'I wonder how he *did* get in?' He saw the front door close.

Eric rested his muzzle on the bottom rail of the fence, and felt hard done by. A warm breeze ruffled the fur along his back. Garden smells assailed his nose. He pricked his ears to catch the distant chiming of an ice-cream van. Someone across the road was playing a piano; someone was laughing. Eric stared forlornly at his own front door. He began to think of ways to get back in.

Just then a young cat came sauntering round the corner out of Clay Street. The cat saw Eric and Eric saw the cat more or less at the same time. The cat, though inexperienced, knew what was called for: it turned and ran. Eric didn't hesitate either. Here he was, a dog; abandoned on the street by his own parents *because* he was a dog. What else was he to do? It wasn't his fault. He ran after the cat.

Eric didn't catch the cat, though he tried hard enough. He chased it down Clay Street and into Apollo Road. He almost cornered it by the Ebenezer Chapel. He only lost it at the scout hut. At the scout hut, the cat left the pavement and ran up an eight-foot fence instead. (An older cat would have done something of the kind sooner.) Eric skidded to a halt. He barked and pranced about at the foot of the fence. The cat glared at him from the top, swished its tail and disappeared.

Eric stopped prancing. He barked half-heartedly at the spot where the cat had been. Now that he had time to think, he was embarrassed. He looked up and down the street to see if anyone was watching. He had his tongue out, panting – more embarrassment! Across the street, a man and a dog came out of one of the houses. Eric recognized the dog. It was a bull-mastiff he sometimes had trouble with on his paper-round. His dad had trouble with it, too. The mastiff spotted him and began barking fiercely and



straining on its lead. Eric couldn't understand the barks in detail, but the general meaning was clear. When he could see which way the man and dog were going, he hurried off in the opposite direction. From a safe distance he allowed himself a defiant bark for the mastiff's benefit.

Eric trotted on. He glanced back once or twice to check that he was not pursued. He began to think

about his troubles. 'That cat distracted me. I've got no reason to be running the streets.' He was in Vernon Street now, and heading up towards the park. 'Yet if I go home, I'll get put out again.'

Eric slowed down and finally stopped. He looked around in a baffled way. There was an interesting smell of sausage roll in the air. He ignored it. Overhead the sky was cloudless and full of light, though it was getting late, half-past nine at least. Suddenly, Eric thought of something. He remembered the writing he'd seen scrawled on the fence which the cat had run up: DOWN WITH THE VILLA, P.L. LOVES R.V., and so on. He remembered reading it. Well – and this was the point – if he could read, he could *write*. He could go home and scratch a message in the dirt: 'S.O.S. ERIC' or just 'ERIC', that would do. 'Mum and Dad aren't stupid,' he thought. 'They'd never get rid of a dog who could write their own son's name in the –' he had another idea '– Emily's sandpit, that was the place!'

Eric at once became impatient to try out his idea. Luckily, on Vernon Street there were grass verges between the front gardens and the pavement. He soon found a bare patch suitable for his purpose. He looked around. Two girls with tennis rackets were coming down the street. He waited for them to pass. A woman with a pram went by on the opposite side. A car and a couple of cyclists came and went. Then it was clear.

Eric sat up straight and extended his left paw. He brushed a sweet-paper and a bit of twig from his chosen spot. He began to write. 'E...R...,' he scratched his letters in the dusty earth. It reminded him of the sand-tray at Mrs Parry's playschool years

ago. 'It's going to work,' he thought. 'E . . . R . . . I . . . C . . . I can do it!'

When he'd finished, Eric put his head on one side and stared at the result. 'Needs to be neater, though – that R's no good.' He scrubbed out what he had written and began again. He became for a time engrossed in the quality of his writing. (If Mrs Jessop – she was his teacher – could've seen him then! Eric was not always so particular.)

All of a sudden he was aware of being watched. He heard a voice say, 'Here, Jack – come and look at this dog!' From the nearby garden a large woman was peering at him over a hedge. She had her hair in rollers and was holding a watering can. 'He's writing – in the dirt!'

From the direction of the house a man's voice said, 'Geroff!'

'Yes he is – he's stopped now – he's scrubbing it out!'

'Geroff!' said the man.

Eric considered the situation, and decided to leave. He set off up the street. 'E . . . R . . . I . . . C,' he heard the woman say. '"Eric", that's what he wrote.'

'Geroff!' the man said. There was a burst of laughter. 'That's no name for a dog!'