

BILLIE HURTS

By Jim Marcotte

Hi Sis.

I know we haven't talked in a long time but I need to have you listen to me a bit. Please don't hang up, just listen. I guess you know Earl's gone. I know you didn't like him, it's OK you didn't come to the funeral or visit me in the hospital or nothin'. I know you had your reasons, really it's okay...

Sure, all right, I'll slow down. I need to talk to you 'cause Billie hurts. She hurts all the time and I don't know what to do. Miss Rosa said, "You always telling me how smart your sister the doctor is, so why don't you call her. Maybe she can figure out somethin'."

So here I am, callin' you.

No, no, wait. I don't want nothin' from you, really, please let me talk to you. I'm sure you heard about my Billie. I guess I know you did 'cause I heard you said I shouldn't be allowed, that Earl and I wasn't fit to have her.

No, I know you did but it's OK. I guess lots of people said stuff like that, but they were wrong. She turned out to be a good girl, I didn't screw her up. We gave her a good home... mostly.

What, wait... you mean how'd we get her?

We got Billie when she was six months old. The county had her in the system since someone didn't want to keep her, so we got to adopt her. We had no idea who her parents were, so I used to pretend that they were royalty, or famous maybe, and that God sent her to us to be raised like a princess should. She was always beautiful, a big-boned strong girl with black, black hair. She was perfect, never sick and never whiny. We were so happy back then, just the three of us, Earl and me and our Billie. Hard to believe that was years ago now.

We named her Billie, but I always liked to call her Billie Jo, even Billie Jo McAlister on account of some dumb song Earl used to sing to her. She followed me everywhere when she was little, in and out, up and down the stairs, to the bathroom, everywhere. Earl used to say she didn't even know he was alive. 'Course now he ain't, but that's a different story. He used to say she would follow me off a bridge if I'd a jumped, and he would sing this song he remembered about Billie Jo McAlister jumpin' off the Tallahassee Bridge. I don't think he had it right, I remember hearin' it a long time ago, but we didn't care. He sing it and we'd laugh and laugh, and Billie would dance around the living room, and we'd laugh some more. I'd even get up and dance around with her.

It was so funny. I sure miss that Earl sometimes.

Old Miss Rosa, she comes over from across the hall. I sure like her. She's all shrunk up and bent over, and her hair is almost all gone. She goes out to the beauty parlor every month to have it done, but I can't ever see what they did, there ain't nothin' there. I guess she likes it though, so good for her. You go, girl, I always tell her. She always brings something for Billie and me to eat, feeds Billie herself and then she waits for me to eat mine. "Billie's had enough now," she says. "You eat some, an' I'm gonna wait right here till you do 'cause I know you'll give it to Billie. Look at you, you are nothin' but skin and bones, now eat." She tries to puff herself all up when she talks to me like that, but it don't work very well. It makes me laugh, then she starts laughin', but that starts her coughin' bad and she has to go. And then I give the rest of my food to Billie.

The doctor said she probably got a ruptured disk in her back, between the five and six or something like that is what he said. It's screwin' up her spine cord. He said she's too old for them to operate on without some kind of money or insurance or somethin' because there ain't no money available in some free program... I guess I don't know what that has to do with it. She ain't old at all. But she can hardly move her head. I can barely get her up to go pee she hurts so bad.

Sometimes she will pee where she's layin', so I get her all cleaned up an' don't say nothin' about it 'cause I know she can't help it. We sit with her head on a pillow an' I tell her about all the good times we used to have. Even after that night with Earl, once they let me come home, we used to go down to the park, walk down by the lake - me in my wheelchair and Billie walkin' beside me. We was quite the pair let me tell you.

Yeah, that was one bad night, all right.

That was the night Earl put me in the wheelchair. He'd been drinkin' hard and was all mad about somthin'. It didn't take much to set him off. We started pushin' at each other and Billie was hiding downstairs like she always did when Earl got mad. He'd get awful mean an' she always stayed clear. I almost got away from him, but the rug by the door slipped out from under me and down I went. Damn Earl come up behind me and kicked me in the back with them big ol' work boots he always wore, and kept kickin' me - then somethin' broke in my back and I went down for good that time. I must'a been screamin' pretty loud 'cause Billie come runnin' through that door full tilt, lit right into Earl and knocked him flat. She was always a big girl, even when she was little. Well, I guess she was never really 'little' but she was still my baby girl. She was all over him with everything she had. He got her off a couple of times but he'd started chokin', and she kept jumpin' back on him givin' him more. She hurt him pretty bad. I never knew that girl could be so mean. Somethin' in his throat swelled up... they said he suff'cated. I couldn't do nothin' to help on account of my legs wouldn't move. They still don't work right, never will I guess. At least I can crawl a little but it hurts. All the time. That must'a been when Billie hurt her neck, too, but you never would've known it. She come over and lay right down with me 'til the police came.

We left Earl lay there. Turns out there weren't nothin' we could'a done for him anyway. The cops, they took Billie down and put her in the back of a cop car, but she cried and fussed and tore up that car until they let her come back up with me. They was gonna take her away and then Miss Rosa, she lit into them cops, she said "You ain't takin' that girl nowhere, what's the matter with you, he was goin' to kill her and she stopped him. That girl's comin' with me," she said, "an' I don't give a rat's ass about no 'proper department.'"

I don't remember much after that, but I do remember Miss Rosa goin' over and spittin' on dead Earl. No account son bitch piece of shit she called him. You leave that girl alone, she said, and they did. Let Billie stay at her place, them cops just shrugged their shoulders and said the county people would be comin' back for her. They never did, you know. I don't know what to do. Sometimes we sit on the floor and I hold her head, that seems to help some.

No, I don't expect you to have the answer, I know you're a thousand miles away... but I guess I thought, maybe... I don't know what. I don't have no money, an' of course no insurance or nothin', ain't that a laugh. She saved me you know. She hurts and I hate it, I can't let her keep hurtin'. Me neither.

I wish you could see her. She's got the most beautiful brown eyes, I wish you could'a seen her before... all this. She was such a beautiful girl, such a happy girl.

Best dog anyone could ever have.

Well, here comes Miss Rosa, I better go. I just wanted to talk with you one more time before... It's been so long, I wish we'd gotten along better, that would've made me happy.

You take care, Sis.

Love you.

The End