

THE BARE PEG

We lie on the floor – a good quality carpet, though, with my cheek touching the pile I can see her hairs trapped, caught, entwined into the wool fibres; its her mark, her legacy, she has left us everywhere throughout the house. We touch noses, our breath intermingles and her right paw rests lightly on my face. We don't move as we have no need to, as we wallow in the nearness of the other. Total trust and total loyalty are the main pieces of the jigsaw which made up her life. They are here even if we cannot see them for they are held for the rest of time hovering, as we close our eyes, as if they are drone flies befuddled in a summer's heat.

We go out twice a day; always the same time but there's often an anxious turn of her head until she is reassured as to which direction is being taken. Good, she knows this route well: we cross the road together at a certain point which means it's the river walk today. There will be different smells, of friends not often seen but always joyful in the reunions. When they do meet there is much barking and jumping up as if they are a pair of mad march hares having a boxing fight - without the fight of course. There's new chums to be introduced, sometimes bigger, others quite small, timid little bundles of coiffed hair and coloured collars which snicker away behind a pair of stout Wellington boots until there comes a reassuring call: '...don't be so silly, Biggles.'

Although walks begin along a pavement, it is not until the road is crossed and the lead unclipped, that it is time to turn and give a real smile, though in the same instant she is gone to investigate if a special molehill is still there, remembered from a last walk.

There are those days at home, in an August sun, sitting on a log by the lily pool where the goldfish are chasing each other,, then there comes that old familiar pressure against one's side, a nose pushes through the crook of an arm, specially

shaped, conveniently formed, for the inevitable arrival of my pal, Crumble. She's safe here, surrounded by all the things in her life she loves. Outside, there's the distant rumble of a lorry and an occasional police siren; but inside, the gleam of pink lips and a slight swallow of her throat tells me she is content.

Moments in her life for anxious eyes, as they study a plate which contains a diminishing mound of Morrison's Steak and Ale pie. Will there be anything left at all; I see it written on her face but she doesn't dare to presume by leaning out further forward than she already is. Yes. Yes, there it is, a long piece of crust covered with the thickest gravy in the world, specially saved and....quite delicious. As promised.

There are three winter coats. Crumble's not keen on a coat although one of them is a tartan cover, quite smart but she knows she's not a Scottie for goodness sake, until, that is, the rain has soaked through the hair on her head and she remembers her back and neck are still dry and warm. She shakes off the fine mist from her long, blonde eyelashes and waits, for as long as it takes, while her paws and tummy are rubbed dry with a large bath towel, its worn yellow pile making a statement: this is exactly right for rainy days for my dog. As soon as I give my declaration: 'you'll do,' she's off again, this time running her head along the carpet while sticking her bottom up into the air. She looks round at me knowing she looks ridiculous but continues with a challenging bark : 'come and play' but I want to get out of my own wet things and have no need to rub my head along the floor. Crumble doesn't care for she's with the man who loves her more than life itself.

But, there's nothing like a walk, whatever the weather. In this family, it is not "walkies", rather it is a jerk of the shoulders in the general direction of a window followed by the lift of an eyebrow. It is all it takes to bring a cloud of new hair to ascend into a sunbeam and a reminder the Hoover bag needs emptying again.

Walks also draw up children; there's a child now, and another. Both want to stroke Crumble though they wait until their mother has studied my face and given the nod of approval whereupon the two descend, patting, rather too heavily, but hard to tell if Crumble or the girls are enjoying the event more. She rolls onto her back, holding herself in place by the use of the folds of skin wedged under her, like book ends. It exposes a pink tummy with large, chocolate-coloured freckles matched by the

enormously (to a child, anyway) long tongue which threatens to clean everything in sight.

This tongue is a constant in my life. Hanging an arm, as one does, over the side of an armchair, guarantees a long upward stroke on my hand, as if to say: 'I'm here, pal, if you need me,' or 'how long to supper?'

A year ago, in her sixteenth year, a glaze began to pass across her eyes. Not the glaze of cataracts but that of dementia. The turn of her head to find me was becoming more urgent and often; her sallies to the rabbit holes become forgotten, for it might mean being alone and she would find it difficult if not impossible to get home on her own. Not that I would ever leave a walk without her, but maybe, in her mind, that is what she could be thinking and I cannot have her distressed. There's a confusion within her basket. Is this her blanket she seems to ask? Her nose joggles across her food bowl, as if even her favourite foods are no longer worth eating.

In her last year, Crumble clings to my legs, pressing deeper, wanting and receiving assurance I am there beside her. It is heart-breaking, this waiting, when we humans outlive dogs by a factor of seven to one. Each day there is some small lessening in her activity, the smile is less, almost as if she doesn't recognise me and then there comes a day, one I have been planning for, but terrified to implement.

When the two girl vets arrive at the house (thank God I did not go to the Vet surgery) they are kind and gentle, knowing the agonies their clients must go through. I rage at my own God and retreat to the Conservatory not wishing to see a paw shaved to receive a needle. Tears course down both cheeks for there is the knowledge I alone ordered the death of my beloved dog. I return to the living room (ironic name for such a day), needing to be there: she's asleep, head resting on her paws like a thousand times before. The deadly cocktail replaces the anaesthetic to still her beating heart and, so soon, she's gone and I am given a picture of a dog's paw print from the vets, almost as upset as myself.

Within an hour her basket and blankets, her toys and worn out balls are piled in an untidy, unhappy heap, ready for the bin. Only the red lead and matching collar remain on the white-painted peg in the kitchen, forgotten by accident and only remembered later that sad evening when I stumble in the dark for a light switch and find the leather strap in my hand.

In Whitehall, the powers that be have installed a memorial dedicated to the women of two World Wars. It consists of a number of coat pegs hung with hats and coats of those women who never came back to reclaim them. I am reminded now of those as I hold her lead which smells so strongly of my dog.

There's something missing, for sure. It's like a "nothingness", if there is such a word. The void is so deep, so black I wonder if I will ever make sense of the pain. All I can do now is to remember the happy days when we would run across the Yorkshire moors together, oblivious of the future, which for my dog, Crumble, would always be a fraction of my own, but you never think of such things when you are cradling a ten-week old puppy with a pink tummy and chocolate-coloured freckles in your arms.

Now, even the collar and lead are gone – just a bare hook with the paint rubbed off its end from constant wear and tear. It appears, to the casual observer, the peg has no function at all but I don't allow it to receive anything new which might fill the emptiness of my soul.

My darling dog is gone. I wait for a day when "nothingness" can be replaced with a "somethingness", for I know, I shall never again see her turn her head to face me, to show her love and loyalty in her eyes.

Sometimes, when I am on my own, I lie on the floor, my cheek resting against the carpet, hoping to smell her scent. Then I see the fine hairs caught, trapped, entwined in the wool and I know she's still here, her spirit hovering within the drone flies on a summer's day.