

Black Dog

Like slipping on a banana skin or falling off a bike it was an accident waiting to happen. The car clipped the chevron sign, span round, drifted across the road and slipped into the drainage ditch. Sitting still for a moment, she waited for the car to slip further, or some other catastrophe to follow. Stupid really, she knew how dangerous this road was. No end of accidents and fatalities. The car rested, still. Then the engine stalled and cut out. Shocked but considering herself lucky she opened the driver's door to look around. Although the back end of the car was resting in the inky water there was room for her to clamber out of the door and on to the steep bank without getting wet. Coat and bag were on the back seat but reaching over made the car rock and risked sending it further into the drain. Best to leave everything. It wasn't that cold after all. Another car would be along in a moment, someone would stop and help.

Climbing out of the dyke wasn't as easy as she'd hoped. With every step the fenland mud oozed around her feet; the black slub coming above her ankles. Centuries of plants had gently decayed in the layers of murky peat, a composting of grass and leaves, festering dead frogs and newts that all collected as evil muck. With every step the gases from the rotting mess wafted up with a smell of decay, old earth and dead breath that hung around her. Grasping at the clumps of grass helped her get a purchase to climb the side of the dyke but with each handful the roots pulled away from the bank, foiling her attempts. She was stuck halfway down this putrid, mouldy excuse of a drainage ditch. Perhaps there was somewhere where the bank was not so steep, maybe a place where a bridge had been built or machinery left that would give a foothold. Maybe the wreck of a car from a previous accident. Looking along the dyke all that could be seen was yards and more yards of straight, steep bank. Then she saw a shadow moving. A shadow that gradually took on the shape of a dog. A dog trotting along on his own, on the top of the bank.

'Here boy,' she called. The dog came to the side of the bank.

'Come here. Good boy.' How to interest him in staying, on coming closer? Nothing around to encourage him.

'Please come here, good boy. Please.'

The dog lowered himself onto his haunches and looked down at her. His soft skin fell down across his brows, as if he was frowning. As if thinking, 'Now what to do?'

'Come here.' She clicked her fingers at him.

The dog crept forwards, still low, down on his stomach, coming closer. She caught hold of his collar with her right hand and as he leapt backwards trying to get away, she held tight and used her left hand to push herself up the bank. Scrabbling with one hand, digging feet into the soft side of the bank, pushing knees into the grass and clinging, clambering, to get to the top of the bank.

The winter dusk was turning to night. Looking across the fields she could see no other cars coming, no encouraging beams of light as people travelled home from work. No lifts to be offered or roadside assistance called. Just fields of black ploughed land that stretched for miles. A flat landscape that was only broken by the dark fringes of reeds where the drainage dykes criss-crossed the land. And far off the lights of a town, away on the horizon. She could see the lantern tower of Ely Cathedral, lit up by spotlights that made it look as though floating above the city, protecting the souls of the residents below. Within sight, but out of reach. Miles away out of reach.

She patted the dog. His coat was silky, groomed and well cared for, he had a name disk but by now it was too dark to be able to read. With his soft coat and gentle snuffling muzzle it was clear that this was no stray. This dog was loved and pampered, with a basket waiting by a hearthside. More importantly, this dog's home probably wasn't too far away. That was it, the best thing to do was to go back with the dog, to his home, and call for help from there.

'Good boy. Go home. Where's home?'

The dog looked up at her, wagged his lazy Labrador tail and then started to trot off.

'Hey, wait for me, wait a minute.' The dog slowed his pace, and she walked beside him. Off the side of the dyke, across the tarmac road and down a rutted track made of old broken brick with lumpy grass.

It started to snow, thin little icy balls like polystyrene floating in the air. It was cold without a coat, but it shouldn't be far. The snow wasn't much, just fine dust that swirled round as it fell on the ground. The Labrador walked on, as if he was a modern-day St Bernard taking his lost traveller home. Not that far now. The snow melted against her body and left her damp around her cuffs and neckline. The wind that began to whip across the fens lifted her jersey up at the back and she wished she had another layer to stop the cold running up her spine. Head tucked down into her top, she followed the prints left by the dog, trying to avoid looking up into the stinging flakes of snow.

They walked on further; she didn't know for how long. Then looking around her she realised there was no chance of finding an

isolated farmhouse out here. There was no sign of life. No welcoming lights in windows, no porch lights left on for late visitors. Just empty blackness that stretched as far as the North Sea. The snow was deeper now, no longer small flurries that eddied around her; now it was large flakes carried by the wind into drifts on the side of the track. The drifts were getting deeper and impeding her way as she struggled along. The paw prints she'd been following as a guide started to disappear under the falling snow as quickly as the dog moved on. It was difficult to see where he was in the dark.

'This is bloody ridiculous. Bloody fine guide dog you've been.'

She didn't know whether to feel sorry or angry with the dog. He might be lost too. Probably thought a human would be able to help him. Reaching out to pat the dog she realised she had been mistaken when she thought he was some-one's pampered pooch. His coat was really quite rough, dirty. He was an animal that lived outside in all weathers. His coat was unwashed. He was unfed and unloved. In fact, he wasn't a Labrador at all, more of an Alsatian-cross, coarse featured and much bigger than a Labrador. He had lost his collar since she'd used it to pull herself clear of the dyke. Now she'd never know his address to be able to take him back to safety. That's if he had a home.

'Look, you'd best go home. I'm going back. I'll wait by the car.'

Even a car in the dyke would be better protection on a night liked this. Stupid to leave it. She might be able to run the engine to get warm.

The dog gave a low growl as she turned around. Hardly audible against the wind, she didn't miss it, and didn't mistake its threat.

'Now then, stop it, you go home now.'

She reached down to see if she could remove her shoe, a sharp slap across the muzzle with that and the dog was bound to run away. The dog leapt forward, snapping with surprisingly large teeth, just short of her face. Protecting herself she turned and started to run, her shoe coming loose as she stumbled down the track. Away from the dog but this meant having to run away from the road. Not the direction she wanted to take but she had to get clear of the dog. Then as she panicked and ran, she could see the shape of a shed looming in the dark. The welcoming sight she'd hoped to see. Inside was a blue light, as if people were watching TV with the house lights off. Tumbling down the slope, with the hound still at her heels, hobbling as she ran, she threw herself at the door. The ancient doorknob rattled loose but there were no locks or bolts, and the door swung open easily. She fell through into what appeared to be the front room of a tiny cabin.

There were some occupants in the room. Sitting round a table, no TV. Just a gas lamp burning in the centre of the table. The room

was palely lit. But even in the half light she could see this was no place to stay. The poor creatures arranged before her were existing in a living death. The odour of centuries of fetid corrosion reached her and she gagged against the smell, recoiling, wanting to escape these new acquaintances. They watched her with eyes that were sunk back in decayed sockets, scarcely able to move or acknowledge her or stretch the fragile sinews that kept their bones together. At the head of the table a Viking, complete with pock marked bronze helmet and grey, wispy whiskered moustache held court. To his right and left were other occupants, a mixed bag of passing strangers who surely had lost their way in times past and were forced to join him at his decomposing banquet. A medieval peasant, with threadbare smock, a Second World War airman with uniform still holding together and beside him the dance-hall girlfriend who, perhaps, spent weeks looking for his body. Only to join him here. On the road to hell.

Feeble and fixed as they were, she could see the fear as their eyes looked over her shoulder, to the monster that now loomed behind her. The dog, huge, black and baying, filled the door space. Standing upright on his hind legs his front claws were talons that clung to the frame. Spittle flew from his foaming mouth, flecking his chest while his eyes flashed with red sparks. He roared at her as she tried to step back to the door and came forward waving his demonic paws. And as she felt herself guided by him, as she turned, it was then that she saw the spare chair at the table. Drawn back waiting for her to join the company.

Her head was on the table, resting. Around her she could hear the murmur of a party, a family party. She had managed to get home after all. Everything was a dream, the awful trek through the snow, and the dreadful timeless dinner party was all some crazy idea that had come into her head while she was resting. There was laughter, voices were raised, shouting and even singing out to one another. As soon as she had the energy, she would lift her head, she'd look around and see her mother and sisters. Turning her head to the right she could see the family dog, quietly sleeping in his basket. Tucked out of the way in a corner. His tail wagged as he dreamed in his sleep. Only they didn't have a family dog, did they? Certainly not a black dog, a black Labrador with silky, shiny coat. She raised her head, wanting to smile but full of dread at finding who was at the party she had joined. And there they were, in the full horror of their decrepit state. Her companions tucked away in a fenland shack. Her companions for all time.