

DOG

“Dog!” shouted Temple. He could never remember the dog’s name so he called it Dog. The dog didn’t seem to mind: then again, it didn’t seem to mind anything – being left outside, eating cheap dog food, being kicked. Temple felt bad about the kicking, but he’d only done it once (twice) and he hadn’t done it hard.

Feeling guilty, he went out in the back garden in case the dog hadn’t heard him. At once rage raced into him: the dog was digging up the rose bed. It wasn’t much of a rose bed but it was hers. He ran out and grabbed the dog by the collar and dragged it inside. He slammed the door and the dog yelped because Temple had accidentally closed the door on the dog’s paw. Temple swore, opened the door, and watched the dog go inside, first limping then, to his relief, walking.

Temple knelt down by the dog. It flinched then wagged its tail. He stroked its head.

“Good dog,” he said. He looked at its collar – sneaked a look, as if he didn’t want the dog to know he’d forgotten its name again. “Good Thor.”

Thor. That was the reason he kept forgetting, or didn’t want to remember. Jill had named it Thor, when she was alive and the dog was small. It was a ridiculous name for a puppy, but it made them both laugh and they hadn’t been doing much of that for a while. And in fact while Temple thought Jill was joking, it turned out she had been serious.

“Call him Thor,” she said, “He’ll protect you.”

Temple looked down at the dog. The dog didn’t look like it could protect anything. It looked worried, and nervous. He felt sorry for it.

“Do you want a walk?” he asked, and immediately wished he hadn’t. The dog got up and left the room. Temple followed it.

“No,” he said. “No, don’t go in there - ”

It was too late. The dog was already dragging an old blue lead from out of the cupboard under the stairs.

“That’s not your lead,” said Temple.

The dog looked up at him with judgment in its brown eyes.

“Drop it,” Temple said.

The dog, he swore, shook its head. It was just one of its weird habits (“It’s a flea,” Jill had said when Temple pointed it out). This did not endear it to Temple.

“Drop it!” he shouted. This time the dog obeyed. Temple knelt and took the lead.

“Not yours,” he told the dog. “You’re not Oliver. I wish you were, but you’re not.”

In answer, the dog walked away, circled seven times, and lay down in its basket.

Oliver had been Jill’s dog, a chocolate lab with a high IQ (according to Jill) and a zest for life that had caused it to chase a ball out of a park and under a bus. Temple thought Jill’s health began to go downhill after Oliver died, but he had no way of proving this, and realised he was not on sure medical ground. He didn’t tell Jill because she would have been upset, or angry, or both. But Oliver was everything the new dog wasn’t: active, clever, good at games, good at tricks, and attentive. He was with Jill all throughout the early visits to the doctor, and would, Temple was sure, have been at her bedside at the end. Instead, Oliver was dead, and Jill was dead, and the puppy she had acquired for him (rescue? Relatives? He was never sure) was still here.

Thor.

“Where’s your hammer?” he said to the dog, and went for a walk on his own.

When he returned, slightly drunk, the dog was nowhere to be seen. Temple went into the kitchen and saw that he had forgotten to close the back door. The dog was in the garden, digging in the rose bed. Temple was furious.

“Get back in here!” he shouted.

The dog ignored him and kept digging. Temple went out into the garden and strode up to the dog. It had most of a rosebush in its mouth. Temple wondered why the thorns weren’t cutting its muzzle. The dog looked up at him.

Temple reached down to pull the tangle of twigs and thorns away. The dog growled at him. Temple stepped back in surprise: the dog had never done that before. Without thinking, he grabbed the branches. The dog pulled back, and Temple let go, his hand suddenly bloody and painful. It was only the fact that he had to stick his hand into his armpit to try and stop it hurting that prevented him from hitting the dog. Instead he said, “What’s wrong with you?” and stomped off back into the house, slamming the door behind him.

The dog looked at Temple until he had gone inside, and resumed its digging.

“Wake up,” said a voice. Temple opened his eyes. He was lying on the sofa. His hand felt tickly and he realised something was licking it. The licking stopped and once again the voice said, “Wake up.”

Temple opened his eyes. Oliver’s soft, familiar tongue was licking his hand. He patted the dog’s head, trying to remember something important about Oliver.

“Wake up,” Oliver said. Temple stared at him.

Oliver’s voice was thick and creamy, like someone advertising chocolates.

There was a scream outside.

“I have to go,” said Oliver, and ran off, barking.

Temple woke up. He was lying on the bed, and the pain in his hand was sharp. He went into the bathroom and carefully washed and cleaned the cuts. Then something caught his eye and he looked out of the bathroom window.

Outside it was dark now, and it was raining. The dog was in the middle of the rose bed, pulling something out of the earth.

Temple ran downstairs, wincing as his hand touched the banisters. He ran into the kitchen and grabbed the handle of the outside door, but it was stuck. He rattled it back and forth, but nothing happened: for some reason the door didn’t want to open.

In frustration, Temple hit it with the flat of his injured hand. He almost shouted as a thousand needles jabbed his palm. In the evening darkness, he could see the dog, still pulling, but he couldn’t see what it was tugging at.

Temple banged on the glass of the door but the dog ignored him.

Then something rose up. The dog backed away, its lips curled. It began barking, the sound muffled by the door. Temple tried the handle again but it wouldn’t move.

Whatever it was that the dog was barking at began to move. It was slow, and lumpy, like it was under a blanket. Temple peered out through the raindrops on the glass.

It was closer now, and taller.

It was his wife.

It was Jill.

Temple stood there, unable to move.

Jill had been gone seven months.

She was outside.

She made a face, the same face she had made when she told Temple that she was dying but she wasn't dead yet.

She pointed at herself, then the door.

Temple's hand moved towards the handle.

She's gone, he heard a voice say.

You scattered her ashes. On the beach.

He took his hand away.

Jill's face changed. She was angry. He could see her lips move, saying words she would never have said. Calling him things she had never called him.

He shook his head.

She took a step back. Her face moved. Her features shifted. It was like looking into a whirlpool.

She was bigger now, heavier.

She raised a hand. It was more than a hand, more than a fist.

She ran at the door.

There was an explosion of blood and flesh. The glass was sprayed red and then there was a dull thump as its body fell to the ground.

The dog was on the thing, tearing at its throat. The thing beat at the dog with its fists. The dog bit deeper: the thing beat harder.

Then both of them stopped moving.

After a while, Temple pulled the doorhandle and it opened.

The dog lay on the patio, bloody around the muzzle. There was no sign of the other, just some shreds of something pale.

He got a blanket and carefully carried the dog inside. He cleaned its wounds, and lay down next to it on the floor. They were face to face, eye to eye. He stroked the dog's head.

"Good dog," said Temple. "You're a good dog."

The dog looked at Temple and shook its head. Temple smiled.

"Sorry," he said. "Sorry, Thor."

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