



Going to the Dogs

Jean Gill

The mirror had always been an untrustworthy friend, the kind who said ‘You look good in pink’ but sniggered behind your back. Debra looked at her fifty-four-year old self and missed the days when the mirror sniggered *behind* her back. Now the contempt was in the open; her face was a ploughed field, furrows drooping her expression into grim, muddy trenches; her hair was lank swathes of grey, thin on top and trailing its thirty year old style into rats’ tails with split ends below her shoulders; her red-rimmed eyes had been a watery, dim brown even before they filled with self-pity; and the contents of her loose polyester top were rolling towards the bulges in her trousers in the anonymous movement of bagged vegetables. Once, she could walk into a room, her feet and head light as dancing, and time made a hiccup for her entry, a heart-stop when the right eyes would find her across the room, and the wrong eyes would notice, then look away. It had been the longest time since the right eyes found her, since her own had dimmed with the hamster-wheel of day-to-day, the deaths and dusting, leaving her alone. Magic? There was no magic. ‘You,’ her reflection told her, ‘are going to the dogs.’

A whine, and a paw scraping her calf demanded her attention because, she corrected herself, she was not alone at all. ‘You started life with more wrinkles than I have now,’ Debra told the dog sitting beside her. Encouraged, the pug stood on her back legs, scrabbling at her mistress’ trousers, whining and beseeching, the deep folds of furry skin making her face look like an aerial view of the Rockies, black

lakes for ears, chin and eyes. 'That's enough, Chuckie.' Debra's hand caressed the taupe fur, soft as moleskin. She stared out the woman in the mirror, the only other person she saw these days, apart from the business of living, the necessary check-out assistants, bus drivers and workmen. This was certainly the only other person with whom she was intimate. She shook herself. This wasn't another person. She smiled ironically. And it certainly wasn't someone she liked. She stroked the little dog again, Chuckie's fur was warm and comforting against her hand. 'You wouldn't notice a few more wrinkles, would you, pet. I wish you'd take all of mine.' Debra's skin tightened and tingled, probably some bloody allergy she was going down with. She sighed and went to clean the kitchen. That was as exciting as the day got.

For several days, Debra avoided the mirror. It did her no good brooding over what she'd lost. Far better to take Chuckie to the park and play ball with the one friend who could be trusted. No moods, no lies, no walls of silence. Debra had finished with all that. She'd gone back again and again, offering a fresh start, remembering only what was good, opening that place deep deep inside herself to whatever life brought her. And it had been the same every time; twin thoughts and roses, followed by misunderstandings and barbs, and then the wall of silence. Distance or death, it was all the same. Debra threw the ball for the umpteenth time, knowing that Chuckie would always come back, wagging her tail, panting with the rightness of her world. Until the umpteenth and first time, when Chuckie disappeared behind a clump of rhododendrons and no matter how often Debra called, no Chuckie.

Irritated, Debra marched into the shrubbery to find her dog whining and sniffing bottoms with a sad quivering scrap of a mongrel. All was clearly not right with his world. He was tied to the leg of a park bench with a rope long enough to allow him to crawl into the shrubbery and hide. Half-starved and greasy, his eyes bloodshot, he stared at Debra without malice, waiting for a kick. She should take him to the RSPCA but it didn't take a genius to guess that he'd been abandoned and that no owner was going to show up, tearfully happy at being re-united with their Bonzo or Rex. Instead, she took him home and Chuckie expressed her approval by wagging her tail and peeing in the house.

Bathing the new dog was mostly a question of transferring dirt from the animal to the bathroom walls but there was an unexpected reward. Cleaned up, and after a week of being fed a teaspoon of fish oil with his biscuits, Barnaby, as he was now called, had the rich russet coat of a setter, long and silky. Strands of Debra's own grey hair mingled with Barnaby's rich red as she cuddled him. 'You wouldn't notice a few grey hairs among all of this,' she told him. 'I wish you had mine and I had silky red hair like yours.' Debra sighed and scratched her suddenly itchy scalp, then got on with the chores.

It took most of her time to care for the dogs and carry on with the

basics in her own life, so Debra didn't feel the pull of the mirror as much as she had when she'd first stopped looking in it. She thought it was probably better if she didn't think about how she looked at all. After all, the dogs didn't care. So she threw on some old clothes and gathered her hair into a ponytail. Strands seemed to get in her eyes all the time these days so she'd taken to wearing her hair up. Although she barely showed the brush to her own hair, she spent hours grooming the dogs for the sheer pleasure of bringing a gleam to their coat and their eyes. Sometimes, she thought she could feel purring under the hypnotic motion of the bristles along the lie of the fur. Wool-gathering, in the to and fro of the brush and the half-closed eyes of Barnaby, Debra jumped at the sudden stab of pain, confused. Her hand on the brush was still, with its cargo of russet hair, but when she tried to carry on grooming, it was her own hair that was being yanked. Stupid woman! The elastic band had loosened, letting her hair down, sneaking under the brush while she was day-dreaming. She untangled the shiny red hairs, freeing her own, and she finished grooming both dogs.

Something nagged at her as being odd but she couldn't think what. It was at three in the morning when the answers to crosswords and the universe generally arrive, that it dawned on her. However, she knew that 3 a.m. revelations were often daytime idiocies so she turned over and went back to sleep.

Toast, marmalade, coffee and dog-walking all required her early morning body but not her brain and it was nearly lunchtime when she remembered the wrongness. How come there had been no grey hairs? She let down her hair and squinted at it to the left and to the right. It had grown. Obviously it had grown! But should it have grown that much? And as far as she could tell from such a weird angle it looked glossy. And, unequivocally, red. How could she not have noticed? Of course, she had been trying hard not to notice. Inevitably, her train of thought took her to her old, recently neglected friend.

Except that the woman in the mirror was a stranger. Abundant, rich red hair gleaming with amber highlights, clearly in need of brushing, but still. And smooth, clear skin, not one wrinkle on a flawless face. The eyes gave her away though. The woman in the mirror was in shock. Watery brown eyes opened wide and met her own, unmistakably their reflection. Debra looked down below the neck of the amazing woman and saw the same old lumpy body in shapeless clothing. A whine and a paw reminded her of Chuckie and she stroked her absently, then with sudden attention to the wrinkles in the cute folds of the dog's head. Were there more wrinkles than before? She sighed again. How could anyone tell if there were more wrinkles on a pug or a few grey hairs in a red setter's coat. There was only one way to check this out. She looked again at the mirror, assessing the woman coldly. She looked at the two dogs and shook her head. No, they wouldn't do.

For the next week, Debra visited the local animal shelters, explaining that she was looking for a dog, a special dog. As soon as it was clear how choosy she was, the welcome smiles faded and she realized that this wasn't going to work. She turned instead to the local newspapers, feverishly scanning the 'Pets: dogs' column until, after a couple of anxious weeks, she found what she was looking for: '2 year old female husky needs good home due to owners moving house.'

Debra passed the owners' interrogation with honours and the husky passed hers; feisty, not used to children (who cared), good with other dogs (pew) and with the beautiful blue eyes typical of the breed. After appropriate tears (from the ex-owners) and warm enthusiasm (from everyone, including Wolf, the dog) Debra was walking her very own husky back down the street. She was sizzling with anticipation but she would wait until the next day for her experiment, allow Wolf the night to settle into her new home.

Dog-walking with three was an exercise in lead-dancing. Debra clung on until she reached the park, where she unleashed them, relying on Wolf to copy the others in coming when called. Finally, back home, in front of the mirror, she called Wolf to her side and stroked the beautiful cream and grey fur. 'What beautiful blue eyes you have,' she crooned. 'I wish I had eyes like yours.' The mirror wavered in front of her eyes as they watered worse than ever. She swore and fetched a hanky out of the drawer, wiping her eyes clear until gradually she was looking straight into the dim brown eyes of a beautiful young husky, who looked back at her with all of the trust his species generally gives ours.

Debra rushed to the mirror. Blue eyes sparkled back at her, dramatic in that pale, smooth skin against the red hair. But it was a pity that the mouth was so thin and turned down, and that body looked so out of place, like in one of those children's books where you could fit different heads with different bodies. Now, there was an idea. At that moment, the doorbell rang. Nobody ever called unless Debra had summoned them to mend a tap or deliver a pizza, so she checked the spyhole. Only the Postie, with a parcel that wouldn't fit through the letter-box; probably the dog accessories Debra had ordered. She opened the door, took the parcel and growled at the man, who paled and left quickly. Debra turned to the rest of the pack, rubbed against them and went to get scissors to unpack the bedding and treats, new collars and squeaky toys. She stroked the base of her spine absently, where it had been knobbly and irritating all day.

The RSPCA Officer hesitated over the telephone but there were so many dogs looking for homes and not everyone could provide for a dog as big as this. He remembered the woman as a little strange but then, who was he to judge? So many people who were good with

animals seemed a little strange with humans. Why, his wife had said to him just yesterday that he cared more for his sodding dog than he did for her. Perhaps he shouldn't have told her why that was but what did she expect him to say! So if someone was a bit strange, it didn't mean she'd be no good as a dog owner and that's all he was interested in. Seeing as a husky had been brought into the shelter, and the woman had been so insistent about wanting one, with the usual blue eyes, he ought to follow up the chance of finding a home. He dialed the number but there was no response. He glanced at the address and noted that it was on his way home. He could drop in and that would put his mind at rest too, let him see where the dog was going.

Jim parked the little van he used for work and checked the address. Yes, that was it all right, a typical shabby semi with an overgrown front garden. As he walked up the path, he could hear the barking indoors and when he rang the bell, the clamour was deafening. He waited and the barking started to die down but nobody came to the door. He had been in this job long enough to see all sorts. Some of his workmates said he spoke dog and it was true that he just knew when there was something wrong, however plausible the owner might be. Behind respectable facades, he'd uncovered puppy farms and hidden iguanas, starving donkeys and colonies of caged cats. There was something wrong - he just knew. He tried the door handle and it gave way. Well aware of the dangers of dogs defending their territory, he phoned for back-up. Perhaps the woman had collapsed and needed medical attention. If she returned and he'd called out the boys for nothing, no harm done that a few apologies wouldn't put right. He went back to the van, put on his padded jacket and gloves, got the dog-catcher noose and a crate, and waited.

The moment his mate arrived, Jim nodded to him and opened the door. They were greeted by seven, eight - no, nine - dogs of all shapes and sizes. They looked to be in reasonable condition but their desperation to see Jim made him suspect they'd passed on a meal or two. Jim called round the house and checked the rooms, accompanied by a surprisingly docile pack, but there was no sign of the human occupant. He went into the kitchens where eight empty dog bowls were laid out on the table and he hunted around till he found the dog food. He shared it out, adding a cereal bowl to feed the ninth dog. He was surprised at how well cared for they were and how accepting of his presence. Well socialized, then, and quite clear on who was the leader. Jim observed them as they wolfed down their meal: a cross-breed with reddish coat, a pug, a greyhound running to rolls of fat, a papillon with a sloppy almost human mouth, a clumsy Afghan hound, something that looked like a poodle but with straight hair, a German Shepherd with bad teeth, a brown-eyed husky type - so she hadn't found exactly what she was looking for - and one other.

'That's the leader of the pack.' Jim pointed her out. She had a beautiful curly red coat and tail, neat mouth with bright teeth, blue

sparkling eyes and a perfectly proportioned slim body. Even eating, she moved with infinite grace, not gobbling her food like the others. She glanced at him sideways, almost as if she recognized him. Jim shook his head. His wife was right. Work with animals too long and it did things to your head.

‘Nightmare!’ he shook his head. ‘We’re going to have to take these back to the shelter and if the owner doesn’t turn up that’s nine mouths to feed and home. Start with this one. He swung his noose and lassooed the curly red-head, ignoring her snapping complaints as they manoeuvred her out of the kitchen door, into a crate on the lawn and then into the big van. The others came quietly after that.

‘Do you think the owner will turn up?’

‘Who knows,’ replied Jim, closing the van doors.



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