

THE NAME OF THE DOG

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness, of mouldering leaves and dismal hopelessness... the benefits of walking the dog in the dank woodlands, where the huge trees almost obliterated the afternoon light, completely eluded her. Take the dog for a walk, they said, it might help. But how did it help? It just gave her more time to brood.

Only the dog, snuffling relentlessly in the undergrowth nearby or dashing off after a squirrel, prompted fleeting reminders of what it was like to feel touched by her surroundings. And she was grateful for a few warm moments that might help to melt the lead weight that had replaced her heart.

If she had been a poet, she might have found the words... but she wasn't a poet.

Words did not come easily. Her mind, always full of images, impressions, feelings, had all the characteristics of looking out of the window of a high speed train that was going too fast to register anything more than a blur. Trying to write things down, other than shopping lists or lesson plans, had always proved elusive. Despite her fervent wish for it to be otherwise, just wishing, wasn't enough.

As it grew colder, Gloria decided to head home. She turned to re-trace her steps looking for the dog and stopped sharply. It was nowhere to be seen. She called, but no response. For how long had the dog been gone? She had no idea. In fact, she simply couldn't remember when she had last paid it any attention.

Gloria was in her mid-forties and lived in an end-of-terrace house in a small village. She had a quiet and orderly life, going to and from work during term times and using the holidays to prepare her up-coming classes and going for long walks. Her friends were mostly busy with their families so she didn't see them often but she was used to her own company and didn't mind living alone. In fact she often told herself that couldn't ever have shared her life since she liked things done her way and would have found it very irritating to have to adapt.

Her name was clearly a mistake. She didn't think she had ever felt glorious. What had her parents hoped for when they chose it? It was hard to imagine herself standing out from the crowd since she had always avoided taking risks. Which was why she had surprised herself on that Saturday afternoon when, driving home from her weekly shop, she had stopped for the boy thumbing a lift. Picking up strangers was quite contrary to her nature, though she always felt a twist of guilt whenever she drove past a hitchhiker. So why him?

As he got in and perched his backpack on his knees he said he was heading for a village about 2 miles beyond where she lived where he was hoping to stay for a few nights with someone he knew. Sofa-surfing, he called it, and she quickly understood that he was homeless and often slept out overnight. She didn't press him with questions, but he chatted quite easily and she listened with genuine interest.

He had left home when he was sixteen. His parents having given him a hard time when he was thrown out of school for smoking cannabis in the playground during a lunch break. He didn't miss his home, where he now felt unwelcome. What he missed was school because, although he had quite severe dyslexia, he actually loved learning and didn't mind that he struggled with exams or failed to get the grades he deserved. His favourite subject was English and his English teacher had really encouraged him by suggesting he read poems and short stories rather than novels. Gloria told him that she was a history teacher which seemed to impress him and she wondered whether he would have liked to be a teacher himself.

When they reached her home, she stopped but something changed her mind and she drove him on to his destination. Before he got out of the car, he turned to her, shook her hand and thanked her warmly for her kindness. She felt glad she had given him a lift, touched that he was so appreciative and surprised that he was so unexpectedly polite. Then she drove home and forgot about him.

It was around two months later on a Saturday morning when he knocked on her front door. He apologised for disturbing her, but said he had come round because was thinking of becoming a gardener and he was looking to get some experience. He wondered whether he could do some gardening for her. Whilst she knew her front garden was quite neat, though not much of a gardener herself she did make an effort with that, her back garden was a mess.

On an impulse she said he could come round and look to see if it was work he wanted to do and whether it would give him the kind of experience he was after.

From then on he came over every Saturday. The agreement was that he would work for two hours but he always worked for nearer to four, refusing steadfastly to accept any extra money than the agreed weekly amount. Much of the initial work was clearing accumulated junk and uncovering the flowerbeds underneath, only then was he able to start the job of weeding and making space for the surviving plants to grow more freely.

His first stint of weeding was a revelation. Several times she looked out of the kitchen window wondering how it could possibly take him so long to weed such a small area, and feeling a bit

impatient at the slow rate of progress. But after he had gone, she went out to look and was amazed at the meticulous care he had taken – not a weed in sight and each plant sitting proud, propped up by a twig where necessary, with plenty of space to grow strong and tall.

As the months passed, Saturdays fell into a routine. He would arrive on the bus and she would know whether he had slept at his friends or slept out according to whether the bus was coming into or going out of the village.

One day, he arrived with a cake he had made. Another day, she suggested he could bring any spare clothes so she could wash and dry them whilst he was busy in the garden. Sometimes he would bring bulbs or small annuals for planting – she never asked where he got them but just allowed herself to be moved at his thoughtfulness and his pride in making her back garden into something special.

He proved to be very reliable and if she had to go shopping when he was due, Gloria would leave the back door open so he could make himself some tea or shelter from the rain. For the most part he was energetic, cheerful and upbeat, but on some days he could be morose, withdrawn and edgy. She learnt to give him space on the edgy days and just to produce tea and a sandwich without expecting conversation.

Then there was the day she took him to get the dog and from then on, the dog accompanied him on the bus and sat loyally next to him as he did his garden chores. She bought in some dog food so it could have something to eat whilst the boy had his sandwich. Sometime later, when she asked the boy about his plans for a gardening business, he said he hoped to get started soon and was planning a website – onemanandhisdog.com. Gloria said she would be happy to give him a reference if he needed one, and put her name and address on a bit of paper for him.

One Saturday in early autumn he didn't come. She looked out for the bus. Several came and went in both directions, but he didn't get off. She got quite angry, but knew that this was a front for feeling both disappointed and worried.

Some three weeks later, when she had resigned herself to not seeing him again, a policeman arrived with the dog. They had found her name and address in the boy's coat pocket after he had been discovered early that morning lying near the dustbins behind the supermarket where she did her weekly shopping. Dead from a suspected overdose.

Gloria got back to the house long after dark – distraught because she had lost the dog. But despite the deep sense of failure, her anxiety for the dog's safety had awakened some kind of life force within her. In growing panic, she had climbed and run and shouted like a mad woman until it got so dangerously dark that there was no other option but to give up and go home.

Dumping her coat, scarf, gloves and muddy boots by the door, she limped to the phone and started calling anyone that might help – the RSPCA, the local walking club, even the police. None were optimistic about finding the dog, but everyone she spoke to said they would try. Without bothering to eat, she went to bed and actually cried for the first time since hearing of the boy's death, until she finally fell into a deep sleep.

Some days later, when she had given up all hope, the dog turned up on her doorstep exhausted, shivering and thin. And with a broken leg. She couldn't believe it – a journey of more than five miles from the wood where they had been walking and with such an injury. The vet put the dog's leg in a cast and Gloria took it back to the house, determined to care for it to the best of her ability until it was completely well. And, meanwhile, to put the wheels in motion to find a dog-loving home that could offer more than she could.

As she nursed the dog back to health, she found herself remembering episodes from the time she had known the boy. The one she came back to most often, was the day he got the dog. At his request, she had driven him to a traveller's site some ten miles away where the travellers had a number of stray dogs they were trying to find homes for. Gloria had been appalled by the squalor of the place and really uncomfortable about being invited in to one of the caravans for a cup of tea while the boy took his time to decide which of the dogs to choose. Looking back, she felt ashamed of how judgmental she had been and how utterly relieved she had felt when the choice had been made and they were able to leave.

The boy was overjoyed with his new companion and it did seem like love at first sight, as the dog sat on his lap and snuggled inside his jacket. She asked what he was going to call it. The boy had become uncharacteristically quiet. In the absence of his usual happy chatter, she had time to think and she realised how pleased she was that he now had something to love and to look after.

She had stopped the car at his friend's house and given the dog a little pat as the boy turned to her with a huge smile and said that he had just made a big decision.

He had decided that he was going to call the dog Keats.