

## The Old Man and the Dog

Saying goodbye to Meg was the hardest thing I've ever done. She'd been part of my life for so long, always there when I needed her.

Throughout the last fifteen years, she'd been my closest friend, sharing my joy and sadness.

She'd seen me marry and divorce, have two children, lose my mother and nurse my father through a long illness. So much in one lifetime.

We buried her in her favourite corner of the garden, beneath the flowering cherry tree. Matthew made a little cross out of wood and Laura carefully printed her name in red crayon<sup>1)</sup>.

Friends are always full of good advice at times like that. Get another dog is one of the favourites—but you can't replace a friend like that.

My father had been left almost helpless after a stroke. I'd nursed him back to health, but I was beginning to feel that we'd taken a step backwards.

A month after Meg's passing, I took a tray<sup>2)</sup> into the garden for Dad. He liked to sit on the bench in the sunshine.

"Tea and biscuits, Dad," I said cheerfully.

He turned away, startled, but not before I'd seen the tear on his cheek.

"What a lovely day," I burred, giving him time to compose himself.

"Yes Jill," he said at last. "It's beautiful."

"Try to eat something, Dad."

He sighed and looked up at the sky.

"The children will be home from school soon." I smiled. "Then you'll have a fight on your hands if you want a biscuit."

He chuckled softly and I had to swallow the lump which had risen in my throat.

"I love you, Dad." I rested my hand on his shoulder. "Please, don't give up."

"I don't know what you mean." He shrugged<sup>3)</sup>.

"Yes, you do. You've fought every inch of the way, you were winning, too, but lately, it's as if you've just given up."

He heaved a sigh and picked up a biscuit, nibbling at it before grinning at me.

Dad's decline puzzled the doctor, too.

"I'm sorry. There's nothing physically wrong with your father, apart from what's left over from the stroke. And mentally, well, I really don't think there's anything to worry about there."

The doctor was right. Dad's blood tests came back clear, and further tests showed nothing wrong. He should have been continuing to get better—but he wasn't.

I tried all kinds of new meals to tempt his failing appetite. I even persuaded him to come for a drive in the car, but as soon as we got home, he'd sink back into apathy and I'd think, I'm losing him again.

What made it so much harder to bear was the fact that I remembered him so well as a young man. He'd been so full of energy and life, carrying me on his shoulders, chasing me around the park and catching me up in his arms.

He's set off for a walk and always, always, I'd run out of the house behind him. He'd had such a zest<sup>4</sup> for life that it broke my heart to see him now, sitting out in the garden, a blanket over his knees, gazing miserably into space.

When he first came to live with us after the stroke, he'd been bed-ridden. I smiled as I remembered how Meg had finally got him up.

Dear Meg. She'd brought in a stick from the garden and trotted straight upstairs with it.

I followed her, wondering what on earth she was up to. She deposited the stick on Dad's bed, then stepped back, wagging her tail like mad.

Dad lifted his head from the pillow.

"What's this?"

She barked ever so softly and nudged the stick with her nose.

"For me?" Dad chuckled, reaching for it, but Meg was too quick and snatched the stick back.

It turned into a game. Every time Dad tried to touch her stick, she whipped it away. At last, she dropped it on the floor. This time, Meg let him pick it up.

"Jill." Dad shouted. "Jill."

When I got to him he was laughing.

"Would you help me down the stairs?" he asked. "I'd like to sit out in the garden. I can throw the stick for Meg."

"Of course, Dad." I'd been thrilled and from that moment on, he'd progressed in leaps and bounds.

Meg had been a friend to me, a playmate to the children, but she'd been so much more to Dad. She'd been with him all the time, keeping him company for the hours he had to spend alone. No wonder he'd declined. He had time to sit and brood and think, and sadness had settled all around him.

The following day, I settled Dad in the garden and left the children playing under his watchful eye.

"I won't be long," I promised. "You'll be all right, Dad? If you want anything, Matthew can get it for you."

"Thanks, love." Dad smiled. "Don't worry. I'll keep an eye on things." I could never replace Meg, I knew that. But I could, perhaps, fill a void in Dad's life. I'd never been to an animal home before and wasn't prepared for the shock. Not only dogs, but cats, a couple of ponies, three pygmy goats and several rabbits wanted new homes.

Two sisters ran the place. Hardly aware of what I was doing, I found myself pouring out my life story to them.

Babs, one of the two nurses, led me to the end of the row of pens. There, in the very end, I saw Sadie sitting in the corner. She wasn't sitting quietly. She was howling—a sad, heart-broken noise. As soon as she saw us, she stopped and came over to me, staring at me through the wire. She seemed to be weighing me up.

When I poked my fingers through the bars, she shied<sup>5</sup> away from them. I spoke softly to her, coaxing<sup>6</sup> her to come to me. After what seemed an age, she came forward and licked my fingers.

"She's very gentle," I remarked, wondering how she would take to my noisy children. I'd already lost my heart to her in a way I never imagined possible.

“Her owners moved away,” Babs said. “They put her in boarding kennels, saying they’d be back in a week but they never returned. She won’t give her trust easily, but if she’s given enough love—well, who knows?”

“How cruel.” I gasped. “How could they?”

“Oh, it could have been a lot worse,” Babs continued. “She was never physically hurt, but her confidence has taken a terrible battering. She needs constant reassurance and can’t bear to be alone.”

“She’d never be alone,” I said and Sadie wagged her tail as if she understood. And in our house, believe me, there’s no shortage of love.

“When I got home, Matthew and Laura were out of sight. Dad, as always, was staring into space. He didn’t even bother to read any more, but seemed to spend his whole life just watching time slip away.

“Dad...”

He turned and looked up at me, taking a moment or two to register that I wasn’t alone. I looked at Dad’s face. He stared at the dog and for an awful moment, I thought he was going to reject her. But Dad could never be cruel... he stretched out his hand and called to her.

“Come on, lass,” he said softly. “I won’t hurt you.”

At last, she ventured up to him and sniffed<sup>7)</sup> at his blanket.

“What’s her name?” Dad asked me.

“Sadie.”

“Hello, Sadie.”

She sat beside him, pressing against his legs while he stroked her head. He’d never tired of doing that, just as he’d never tired of petting Meg.

“She needs a lot of love,” I said and explained why.

Dad looked really angry for a moment. He could never stand any kind of cruelty, to animals, children or even over adults. “Well,” he said softly.

“We’ll just have to make it up to her. What made you get another dog?”

“Well...”

“No, it’s all right.” Dad patted my hand. “I know how you miss Meg. The children do, too. She’ll be company for you and you’ll be able to go for nice long walks again. Perhaps I’ll be able to take a turn with the walks. I don’t intend to spend the rest of my life sitting here.”

It was the first time in months he’d given any thought to the future. It warmed my heart.

“I couldn’t go far at first,” he went on. “But if I gradually build up my strength...” Matthew and Laura appeared then and Sadie brightened up. She ran to greet them as if they were long-lost friends. When I looked at Dad, he was laughing.

I thought of the people who had abandoned Sadie and wondered if they really knew just what they were missing. It was their loss, our gain. We were her family now and we’d never let her down. I think she knew that.

In fact, in a strange way, Sadie seemed to take over where Meg left off.

Dad didn’t take her out of the garden, but he’d walk up and down with her, chatting all the time. She’d gaze up at him, entranced.

Yesterday marked the anniversary of Meg's death. A year has passed. A new era<sup>8)</sup> has begun.

The children planted some snowdrops beneath the cherry tree, determined that Meg should never be forgotten. We all shed a few tears. Then the miracle I'd waited so long for happened. Dad walked slowly into the kitchen and took Sadie's lead down from its hook. Sadie barked merrily and turned round and round in circles until she almost fell over. She seemed to sense that this was a special occasion.

"Right, anyone coming for a walk?"

He's only ever walked her round the garden before. Longer walks were left to me or the children. I held my breath.

"I'll come." Matthew grabbed for his coat.

"And me." Laura was already pushing her arms into the sleeves of her Jacket. I stood at the window and watch their slow progress down the road, Dad in the middle holding tight to Sadie's lead, a child on either side of him. He got halfway down the road, then stopped. My heart stopped with him.

I held my breath, then realized he'd stopped because he was laughing. He laughed so loud that I could even hear him. Tears ran freely down my face. I hurried to the hall, pulled my coat from the peg and ran outside.

"Dad." I yelled.

They stopped and turned.

"Dad," I called again, feeling all of six years old. "Can I come?"

"The more the merrier," he called back and held out his arms, just like he used to when I was a little girl.

I ran to him, heart pounding, knowing that this time he wouldn't be able to lift me and whirl me round.

But as he enfolded me in his arms and hugged me close, the feeling was every bit as good.

"Welcome back, Dad," I whispered, and he hugged me even tighter.

## 老人与狗

与梅格的诀别是我这一生遇到的最难的事情。她已融为我生命的一个组成部分，总是出现在我最需要她的时候。

过去的15年，她一直是我亲密的伙伴，与我共享欢乐与悲伤。

她目睹了我成家、离异、生下两个孩子、失去母亲以及伺候久病的父亲---一生中那么多的事。

我们将她葬在了花园一角的一棵开满鲜花的樱桃树下，那是她最喜欢去的地方。马修用木头做了一个小十字架。劳拉认真地用红彩笔在上面写下了她的名字。

在这种时候，朋友们总会提出各式各样的建议，其中最多的一条莫过于再养一条狗了。可是像梅格这样的朋友是无法取代的。

父亲在一次中风后，生活几乎无法自理。在我的服侍下总算康复了。但是现在，我却有点感到状况后退已不如以前了。

梅格离去一个月后的一天，我端着托盘来到花园找父亲。他喜欢坐在长椅上享受阳光。

“爸，来点茶和饼干吧。”我兴冲冲地说道。

他一愣，旋即背过身去。但我还是看到了他面颊上的泪水。

“天真好。”我忙岔开话，以给他时间恢复常态。

“是的，吉尔。”他终于开口了。“挺美的。”

“爸，吃点东西吧。”

他仰望长空，叹了口气。

“孩子们马上就放学了。”我笑着说，“那会儿再想吃饼干可就得和孩子们争了。”他轻轻一笑，而我差点哭出声来。

“爸，我爱你。”我把手搭在他肩上。“你要挺住。”

“我不明白你的意思。”他耸了耸肩。

“不，你明白。你一点点地与病魔抗争，你正在战胜它。可是近来，你却好像要自暴自弃了。”

他叹了口气，拿起块饼干，咬了一小口，对我笑了笑。

父亲的退步也令大夫感到困惑。

“我很抱歉，可是除了那次中风所留下的后遗症，你父亲没有别的什么毛病。我实在想不出他有什么精神上的创伤。”

大夫说得对。父亲的血液检查结果没有问题，其他的检查也证明一切正常。他理应恢复得越来越好，可是情况并非如此。

我变着花样为他做饭，以提高他逐渐消退的食欲。我甚至劝他坐车出去兜风。然而一回到家，他的情绪就变得漠然低落。我预感到我又要失去父亲了。

更令人难以接受的是我清楚地记得父亲年轻时的样子。他曾是那样地精力充沛，生龙活虎——把我扛在肩膀上；绕着花园同我追着玩，然后紧紧地把我搂在怀中。

他外出散步时，我总是跑出房门跟在他的身后。他对生活曾经是那样地热情，以至于我在一见到他坐在花园中，膝上铺条毯子，痛苦地凝视前方，我的心都要碎了。

父亲中风后刚来我这儿时，他只能卧病在床。想起梅格帮助父亲重新站起的情景，我忍不住笑了。

可爱的梅格。她从花园中叼着一截木棍，径直跑上楼。

我跟着她想看个究竟。她把木棍放在父亲床上，然后退后几步，使劲地摇着尾巴。

父亲从枕头上抬起头。

“这是做什么？”

她叫了起来，声音从来都是那样的轻柔，然后用鼻子蹭了蹭木棍。

“给我的？”父亲咯咯地笑了，便伸手去够。可是梅格飞快地冲上前，把棍子夺了回来。这成了一场游戏。每次父亲马上要得手的时候，梅格总是抢先把棍子夺走。最后，她把木棍丢到地板上。这次梅格让父亲去拾起木棍，她没去抢。

“吉尔。”父亲大声唤着。“吉尔。”

当我走近他时，他正在开怀大笑。

“你能扶我下楼吗？”他问道。“我想坐在花园里。我可以为梅格扔木棍。”

“爸，当然可以。”我激动万分。从这一刻起，父亲迅速地康复了。

梅格是我的朋友，孩子们的玩耍伙伴，但对父亲她更为重要。她始终与父亲形影不离，在他独自一人时伴随在他的左右。无怪乎他现在变得消沉低落。他那么长时间坐着沉思，却实在无法摆脱萦绕在心中的苦痛。

第二天，我把父亲在花园里安顿好，并托咐他看一会儿戏耍的孩子。

“我不会去久的。”我保证道。“爸，你没事吧？如果你需要什么，马修可以为你去取。”

“谢谢你，孩子。”父亲笑道。“别担心，我会照顾好一切的。”

我知道梅格的角色我是无法取代的，可是我或许能为父亲填补他生活中的这一缺憾。我从未光临过动物之家，一进去吓了一跳。不光有狗，还有猫，一对小马，三只矮羊和一群兔子。他们正等待着拥有新的家。

两位女看护在这里做事。我身不由己地把自己的故事和盘托出。

她们中一位叫巴布斯的看护把我领到围栏的尽头。在那里，我见到了蹲在角落里的萨蒂。萨蒂并非安静地呆着，而是不停地嚎叫着。那是一种悲伤心碎的声音。她见到我们后，静了下来，向我走来。透过铁丝网，好像在打量着我。

我把手指伸进栏杆，她却怯生生地躲开了。我用温柔的声音哄她过来。似乎过了很长时间，她才上前，舔我的手指。

“她很乖。”我说道。我无论如何也想不出她怎样才能喜欢上我那两个淘气鬼。我不禁心凉了一截。

“她的主人搬走了。”巴布斯说道。“他们把她寄养在养狗场，说一周后来接她。可是他们却一去不复返。萨蒂现在很难信任谁。可一旦她得到厚爱，谁又知道会发生什么结果呢？”

“真狠心。”我感慨道。“他们怎能这样？”

“噢，也许情况更糟糕。”巴布斯继续说道。“她从未受过肉体上的伤害。然而她的信心已受到了重创。她需要不断地恢复信心。她不能再忍受孤独了。”

“她不会的。”我答道。萨蒂这时摇了摇尾巴，如同她明白了我的意思。“在我家，请相信我，爱是不会缺乏的。”

当我回到家里时，马修和劳拉已不见了踪影。父亲依然茫然直视前方。他连读书的兴致也没有了。好像生命的全部只是注视着时间的流逝。

“爸……”

他转过身抬头看了我一眼，看到我并非一人，不禁愣了一下。我望着父亲的脸，他正紧盯着眼前这条狗。有一瞬间我感到他会拒绝接纳她。但是父亲不是那种狠心的人……他伸出一只手招呼起萨蒂。

“过来，小姑娘。”他轻声道。“我不会伤害你的。”

终于，萨蒂试探着走向了父亲。在他的毯子上嗅来嗅去。

“她叫什么名字？”父亲向我问道。

“萨蒂。”

“你好，萨蒂。”

萨蒂在父亲身旁坐下，身体紧靠着他的双腿。父亲轻抚着萨蒂的头。他对这个动作从不厌倦，就像他轻拍梅格一样。

“她需要很多的爱。”我对父亲讲出了缘由。

一时间父亲看上去很生气。他从不能忍受任何形式的残忍，无论是对动物，还是对孩子，甚至对成人，一概如此。“喂，”他轻声道。“我们得给她弥补一下，你怎么想起又弄条狗来呢？”

“啊，我……”

“没事儿，这很好。”父亲拍了下我的手。“我知道你想念梅格，孩子们也是。不过这回她能陪你们了。你们可以走远点散步了。也许我也可以跟着转一转。我可不想老坐在这里度过余生。”

这是几个月以来父亲第一次提到未来，我的心随之热。

“我不可能一上来就走得很远。”父亲继续道。“但如果我的力气逐渐恢复的话……”马修和劳拉这时露面了。萨蒂也不禁情绪高涨起来。她跑向孩子们，那情景如同见到久别的朋友一样。我看着父亲，父亲正放声大笑。

我想起了遗弃萨蒂的人，他们是否会想到他们所失去的是什么。这是他们的损失，我们的收获。我们这儿成了萨蒂的新家。我们不会再让她失望。我想萨蒂也明白了这一点。事实上，萨蒂好像以一种奇特的方式填补了梅格离去所留下的缺憾。

父亲没有带萨蒂走出花园。他跟着她在园中到处转着，始终对她讲着什么，而萨蒂则出神地望着父亲。

昨天是梅格离去的周年纪念日。过去的一年已经逝去，新的日子已经开始。孩子们在那棵樱桃树下栽种了几棵雪花莲，算是对梅格永远的怀念。我们都不禁潸然泪下。这之后，我期待已久的奇迹终于出现了。父亲慢慢地走进厨房，将萨蒂的牵狗带从钩子上取下来。

萨蒂欢快地叫着，不停地绕着圈子跑，差点跌倒，好像她也意识到这是一个特殊的时刻。“好了，有谁想去散步吗？”

这之前，父亲只是绕着花园遛遛狗，长一些路程的遛狗留给我或孩子们干。所以，我不禁屏住了呼吸。

“我去。”马修一把抓起了外衣。

“我也去。”劳拉已经把胳膊伸进了袖子里。

我站在窗前，目送着他们慢慢走向了大道。父亲在中间，手中紧紧拽着萨蒂的牵狗带。两个孩子一左一右。刚走到一半，父亲突然停住了。我的心一下子提了起来。我屏住气，这时才发现原来他正纵声大笑。笑声是那样的宏亮，连我都听到了。泪水刹那间从我的眼眶中滚出。

我冲向门厅，从挂衣架上拽下外衣，跑出门去。

“爸。”我喊道。

他们停下了脚步，转过身来。

“爸。”我又喊道，像是一个6岁的孩子。“我可以一同去吗？”

“人越多越开心。”他回答道。父亲伸出双臂，那姿势使我回到了孩提时代。

我跑向他，心怦怦地跳着。我知道这回他不可能再像从前那样将我托起，原地转几个圈了。

但是当他把我接在怀中，紧紧拥抱我的时候，我分明体验到同样的感受。

“爸，欢迎你恢复过来了。”我轻声地说道。这时，父亲把我搂得更紧了。

## NOTE 注释：

crayon ['kreɪən] n. 有色粉笔，蜡笔

tray [treɪ] n. 盘，碟，盘子

shrug [ʃrʌɡ] v. 耸肩

zest [zest] n. 风味，强烈的兴趣，热情，热心

shy [ʃaɪ] vi. shied, shying (常与away from, at连用) 躲避，退避

coax [kəʊks] v. 哄，耐心使...

sniff [snɪf] v. 用力吸，嗅，闻到

era [ɪərə] n. 时代，纪元，时期