

Happiness

He sat on the stone steps of the hospice. Tears filled his eyes. His best friend's last words were, “ don't forget what you promised.”

He gave himself a moment to get his breathing back to normal and push down the sobs he wanted to let rip. It was time to do what he had promised. He didn't really have a choice.

Reluctantly and with a sense of trepidation he made his way to David's home. It was a garden flat at the end of a terraced row of large Georgian houses. They had large bay windows set within sandstone. They looked over orderly lawns and pretty flowerbeds surrounded by trees. It was a nice place to live.

He couldn't believe he would be living here soon. Having no family, David had left it all to him.
Glen had spent years moving about from one tenancy to another. He hadn't saved enough money for a deposit on a mortgage, life was too short for all that sensible stuff, he used to say.

David had had a good job and at the end of his career he had been the headmaster of an expensive private school. He had made sound investments over the years and they had paid for his home.

They had held many lively discussions about the rudiments of private vs public education. Glen was always on the side of equality so their conversations usually ended with agreeing to disagree.
He smiled when he thought about his dear friend. He could never maintain his defensive position as a working man. Considering he was the result of private schooling, university and a ministry job or “miserable job" as he saw it, David said that he had double standards and he was probably right.

A sudden pang of loss rolled over him. Who would he have these conversations with now?

He walked up the garden path and noticed the well-maintained containers and hanging baskets, bursting with bright colours and foliage.
Someone must have been looking after them while David was in the hospice, he thought.

He picked up the heavy brass doorknocker, shaped like a bee, and knocked a couple of times. He heard a deep bark and the kerfuffle of someone coming to answer the door while keeping an animal behind closed doors.

A pleasant, plump, middle-aged lady with stunning, red, curly hair and beautiful, green eyes opened the door. She has the curves in all the right places, he thought.
Her vision took his breath away. She looked at him, “ Hello, ”she said and beamed a warm, welcoming smile.
He could barely speak and he blurted out ” Hi Glen, sent by David.” She nodded, she must have been expecting him.

“Oh, Glen,” she said,” David told me so much about you, I feel as if I know you already. Come in, he's in the kitchen.”

Glen was taken aback, David had hardly mentioned this wonderful woman. He was now both flustered and embarrassed, so talking and walking at the same time was out of the question. He'd never been good at talking to women or anyone he didn't know, come to think of it.

He walked in and tried to listen to her lilting voice but his heart was pounding so loudly in his head that he could hardly hear a word.

He followed her into the kitchen. She had continued to chat as they moved and he picked up that she was called Joy. Pure Joy, he thought.
She lived in the flat above and had been looking after the place while David was away.
She said how sorry she was to hear that he had died and thought he had been a lovely man.

Glen thanked her for everything she had done but he knew that this was not nearly enough.

He looked around the kitchen. It was immaculate, just as he had expected. His friend was always well turned out and organised and his home reflected his exemplary character. The complete opposite of Glen. He would have to change his ways.

He looked at the purpose-built gap under the worktops and there he was. The biggest, dopiest, saddest looking dog he had ever seen. His long ears, sagging skin and droopy eyes were the epitome of the Bassett hound breed.
He was now his responsibility.
They made eye contact and at that moment they seemed to share that overwhelming feeling of loss.

His name was Hap, short for Happiness. How ironic that the saddest looking dog in the world would have such a name. A fine example of David's quirky humour.

“Are you ready to take on this beautiful boy?” Asked Joy. Before he had a chance to respond, Joy handed him his lead. “Would you like to take him for a walk, so you can start to get to know each other?"

Glen had little experience of looking after a dog. He'd researched the basics but he still felt unprepared. As he was not going to let his friend down, he would do his best.

He gritted his teeth as he clipped the lead onto the dog’s collar.  Hap stood up and wagged his long, curved tail. Patiently, Hap looked up at him.

Well that went well, he thought.  Maybe it's not as difficult as he had imagined.

Joy handed him several small, plastic bags, and some other dog walking paraphernalia. She obviously had more animal experience but was trying her best to encourage him.

“Just in case. Here's my phone number, you might need me to rescue you.” She smiled showing her perfect white teeth and Glen blushed again. He was feeling slightly desperate. Sweat formed on his upper lip. He felt completely out of his depth.

Next thing he knew he was being dragged to the front door. Once he opened it, his legs left the surface of the earth and he flew down the steps into the garden. He dropped the lead as he landed painfully on the path. The wind knocked out his chest.
Hap leapt about as if he'd never been outside before and then he began to lick Glen's face as if he was an ice cream.

Glen, now shaken, at the mere strength of the beast and now soaking wet with dog saliva, grimaced and got up on his feet. I hope Joy didn't see that undignified exit, he thought.

He gave himself a moment to regain his composure and then chased after Hap and picked up the lead. Once they were outside the gate, Hap enthusiastically trotted off down the street. He frequently stopped to sniff important stuff such as gateposts, lamp posts and almost every blade of grass.
Glen was eventually dragged to a large red postbox which was particularly interesting to Hap. He spent ages sniffing, licking and peeing on it from various angles.

Glen groaned, he needed a sit down and a drink.

It was as if Hap had read his mind. He led him to an old pub on the high street, complete with dark wooden tables, red leatherette seats and a blazing log fire, even though it was June and sunny.

“Hello there boy!” Said a man from behind the bar, “ Nice to see you again, “ He was looking at Hap. Hap gave him a nod and a familiar bark.
“ You must be Glen” said the barman, “ David said you would be dropping by.”

“Yes that's right, I'm Glen and this is…” “Happiness” the barman interrupted,” He's been coming in here ever since he was a pup. Now I'll get him his usual, and what can I get you sir?”

Hap found a comfy spot by the fire and after consuming half a pint of lager in one go, promptly fell asleep.

Glen, now sweating profusely from the heat of the fire and all his exertions, searched in his pockets for a tissue. Amongst the plastic bags, treats and a ball was Joy's phone number.

Should I call her and ask how to get Hap home in his drunken stupor? That may be a little exaggerated but she might come and meet him anyway.
He dialled her number.

He sat back and eagerly waited for her to appear. After a few minutes her cheery face was now opposite his.

Hap looked up and checked out his new companions. He put his head between his paws and closed his eyes.
It was as if the plan he had made with David was actually working. These humans are so easy to manipulate, he thought smugly. He yawned and turned onto his side. Back off to Dreamland then.

Glen chatted to Joy as if they had known each other for years.

They raised their glasses in memory of David and as they chinked their drinks together it suddenly dawned on Glen that at long last Happiness and Joy had entered his life.

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