

## The Black Dog

Black moods embrace grey days. Sad thoughts find dark places in hope of hiding painful memories. It seemed as such for James that cold, rain spotted September afternoon as he returned to the Black Dog. In the course of just a few hours a depressing curtain had fallen over all his lively, romantic dreams.

Black Dog Hotel they called it now. He had arrived shortly before lunch and noticed immediately how the place had been livened up to what it was ten years ago. The facade was still the same but newly painted, and an extension had been built over half the former car park. Trees had been felled in the park across the road giving more light to the building - light which transferred to his excited, hopeful step. James, with only a small bag for a brief stay had decided to walk out from the train station. He barely remembered the way through unfamiliar streets but the thunder of breakers against the cliffs and the echoing cries of hungry gulls brought clear memories and built on his already heightened expectation.

*'Have you stayed here before?'* asked the landlord.

*'Not stayed, but I did have a delightful meal in the restaurant.'* He turned towards the restaurant as though searching for the table he remembered. *'But that was ten years ago. It looks as though that part of the Black Dog has not been changed.'*

*'No. We've redecorated and smartened it up a bit, but we wanted to retain the character of the original part of the pub. It's the oldest building on the sea front. Some of the timbers are Elizabethan. These beams and panels could tell many stories of fishermen, wrecks and smuggling. It used to be called The Sailor's Refuge. We still have the old cellars which once upon a time were accessible from the beach. They have lots of dark corners where contraband would have been stored. My wife wanted to change back to the pub's original name, but Black Dog had more customer appeal. James was not in the mood for long conversation, but asked politely, 'Why's that?'*

*'Well, there's a story that an old sailor stayed one night with a companion - a black dog. The sailor died in the night here and was buried in the churchyard up on the cliffs. The dog wouldn't move from the room until the day of the sailor's funeral. Then he followed to the churchyard. He stayed there and lay on the grave for weeks until one day he just disappeared. It wouldn't have taken long for the rumours to start. Stories were told of a shadowy black dog being seen in the upstairs corridors and soft whining and whimpering sounds were heard at night. You know how these rumours grow. We still tell the story. It attracts some guests and I've never heard of anyone not staying for fear of a friendly doggy ghost!'*

The landlord - *'Call me Bob'* - picked up James' bag. *'I'll show you your room. I'm afraid all the rooms in the new wing are taken but I'm sure you'll be comfortable in this one. Don't worry about black dogs. There hasn't been a sighting of one since I've been here. Mind your head. The stairs are a bit dark and narrow. They wind round but actually your room is right above the restaurant.'*

The room, like the restaurant, looked straight across the bay. James remembered the view with a strange bright yearning which held hands with a deep, painful sadness beyond tears. The past months of depression swept over him in a new fresh wave, then quickly ebbed. James had travelled to many beautiful places, but selective memory made this view unsurpassable. Of course, it was the backdrop to Janet - the afternoon sunlight in flaxen hair and sparkling hazel eyes - and strangest of all the perfume. He could smell it still - unusual, flowery, enchanting - he had never found a name for it or smelled it since.

*'If there's anything you need, just ring down.'* Bob handed him a key. *'We're serving snacks in the restaurant if you want to eat now.'* The summer dazzle of the memory moment was gone but it returned for a while in the restaurant. He sat at the same table in the window where he and Janet had shared tea and cream cakes. It had all been so brief - a first meeting at the Art Gallery where his mother was showing her latest watercolours. Janet, like him, filling in time between University and further studies or work, was working in the Gallery. It had not taken long to discover how much they had in common - and even less time for James to realise he had fallen in love with someone who felt closer to him than anyone he had ever known. It was so sudden he was overwhelmed with that passion which combines a brave hero with a gentle poet. He felt she was aware of his feelings and perhaps shared them. Maybe tomorrow they would tell each other. The opportunity did not come. James returned to his lodgings to find his bags packed and his mother in tears. She explained that his father whom he had never really known, was in custody.

*'It will be in all the papers tomorrow morning,'* she sobbed. *'I can't stay. The shame!'* They caught the late train to London, leaving no time for him to contact Janet. He had no address except the Art Gallery and did not even know her second name. He scribbled a note to drop into the gallery on the way to the station. It simply said he had to go away on family business, hoped to see her again. How could he write any more? After some deliberation he added a small kiss.

From then on everything happened so fast. Within days James was en-route to his mother's brother in the Philippines. Uncle Jos was good to him, taking him into his design business where he soon found a niche for his skills. Life was good with a round of new friends and social activities, but he had never been able to enter into any deep relationship without a sense of it being inadequate. Even after such a short time Janet had left a strange gap in his life. Now, ten years on, the black hole of an unclaimed memory played on his mind depressingly. It was a well embroidered memory of the most wonderful experience of his life, and he wanted to realise it again. He took the opportunity of a long-promised holiday to visit his mother and see a few old friends - maybe even see his father whom he had despised for his mother's sake. He had rejected the only letter his father had sent. *'Take the car!'* his mother offered when James announced he was to spend a couple of days in Devon, but he said he preferred to go by train. Relived memories need to be close to the original.

After a brief lunch at the Black Dog the restaurant memories spurred him to his planned mission. He lingered though, walking the town, almost afraid that his dreams could shattering like brief clouds across a summer sky. James arrived at the Art Gallery just before closing time. Bryn Davis, the Curator, was pleased to see him, offered condolences regarding his father and said how they missed his mother and how glad that she still sent her work to the Gallery from time to time. James waited patiently through

praise of his mother's works, until it was seemly to ask, *'Is Janet still around? I wrote to her here - just a note with her Christian name. Do you know if she got it?'*

*'Yes. She wrote to you. Sent it to your mother.'* James knew of no letter and wondered what his mother had read.

*'You had a conquest there, lad! And broke a heart I think,'* the Curator said, but without a smile.

*'Where is she now?'* Mr. David gave James an embarrassed stare. *'You don't know?'* *'Your mother never told you?'* He paused, weighing his words. *'She got a job teaching art at a school in Worcester. She was only there a few months when she started with the cancer and before the year was out, she was gone!'*

*'She died?'* James had imagined a host of varying scenarios - friends - marriage - family - but not this. He collapsed into a chair. Mr. Davis brought him a drink.

*'I'm sorry lad. I assumed you would know.'*

James walked and walked for hours until eventually he found a quiet place on the cliff edge and wept into the mournful chorus of sympathetic gulls. Returning to The Black Dog he was glad that Bob was not around. He had no appetite for food or conversation. His wound had lain open for hours and now the numbness was wearing away. Gripped by the aching sadness of a grief that perhaps he had no right to feel - the loss of something which had never really been his - he began to chide himself about his return.

He made his way up the creaking stairs, along the dimly lit corridor to his room. He did not put on a light. Moonlight, filtering through clouds was all he needed till the heavy curtains would be drawn. He stood for a while at the window. Flashes of moonlit spray from the turbulent crashing waves accompanied grief spasms out of a blackness bordering on despair. Lying awake in the darkness he was comforted by the Curator's words - *You broke a heart!* His love had been reciprocated! Eventually he slept. For how long he had no idea, but he woke suddenly. The room was flooded with silent moonlight. The sea had calmed at the turn of the tide. Something had wakened him. He became aware of a soft stroking across the back of his hand. There was familiar smell - Janet's perfume. He dared not move except to turn his head towards his outstretched hand. Two green eyes peered at him balefully. The black Labrador looked up from his gentle licking. Peace - quiet, cool, comforting slowly blanketed James. For a moment the light grew brighter, and he was sure the words were too loud to be just in his mind. It was the voice he remembered - *'I loved you. Now let me go. You have your life to live.'* The dog nuzzled his hand once more before it lay down by the bed. James drifted into sleep where he stayed till first morning light.

Everything in the room was as it had been when he first entered it yesterday. Everything about James felt changed. A dream? But the peace was real - as real as the voice - as real as the memory of a black Labrador dog! He dressed quickly, feeling compelled to walk the bay before breakfast. The air was keen; the rising tide reaching fast across sand. sucking shingle, as it raced to the rocks. He walked the cliff path which droppes towards the beach. A cool breeze played with bundles of mist. His heart stopped for a moment. Along the path ahead of him was another lone walker. The walk, the build - Janet! It must be her. He quickened his step, lost her for a moment in the turn of the path and a wisp of mist, then there she was again - and a few paces behind her - a black Labrador. James hurried but the woman and the dog were well ahead of him. They left the path to walk across the disappearing sand and kept going - now ankle deep in the water - now deeper. Finally, James watched as dog and

companion slipped into the waves. He called, *'Janet!'* but a quiet word inside him spoke, *'Let me go!'* He stepped back to escape the rising water. He looked down. There were no footprints in the sand - woman's or dog's.

James returned to his room at the Black Dog before breakfast. Sunlight had erased some of the shadows from James' heart but the faded fabric around him left an aura of stilled sadness. Was it all a dream? An hallucination of grief? He bent down to run his hand across the carpet where the black dog had lain. With a grin he opened his wallet to insert what he would later refer to as evidence. A new more positive wave of peace passed over him.

At breakfast James sat at the same table he and Janet had once shared. She was there for him. He could feel her but with no ache of longing, just a sad joy of a wonderful memory.

*'Morning!'* Bob appeared. *'Hope you had a good night. You didn't see the black dog I hope?'*

*'Yes, I did!'*

Bob steadied the tray he was holding and stared at James, ready to laugh.

*'He stayed the night with me.'*

Somehow, Bob interpreted James' reply as serious. *'That must have been some dream you had.'*

*'No, it wasn't a dream.'* James pulled out his wallet, opened it, and laid five long black hairs on the white tablecloth. *'He left these on the carpet. There's a couple more if you want to look.'*