

Paterson Loarn

Labrador Love

Mark first saw the big white-breasted fox in Reynolds, a strip of woodland that lay between a motorway and the new estate where he had recently bought his first house. Although the council called Reynolds a country park, runners, cyclists and casual walkers were deterred by the rampant brambles and overhanging branches, so it belonged to the dog people.

Jade, a two-year-old golden labrador, was the reason why Mark circled Reynolds twice a day in all weathers. Soon after moving into his two bedroom mid-terrace new build, he had adopted her from a colleague who was transferring to the company's Singapore office. Mark was not jealous. At the age of thirty-five he was eager to embrace a relaxed and healthy lifestyle. For him, there would be no more staggering into work straight from a night of clubbing, no more jet-lag after sales trips when he saw only airports and no more crazy weekends with girls who dumped him for guys with bigger expense accounts.

After years spent living in high-rise apartments and staring at computer screens under artificial lighting, Mark longed for the freedom of the great outdoors. He craved a dog of his own to accompany him on long country rambles, and the moment he saw Jade, he knew she was his ideal pet. At first sight, he fell in love with her intelligent brown eyes, her smooth coat and, most of all, the silky ears that perked up at the sound of his voice. Jade was a calm dog, but her bark was so deep that on days when he had to travel to the city, Mark left the back door open, confident that she would deter burglars. As part of his new lifestyle, he worked from home, and Jade was content to snooze at his feet until some inner clock woke her. When his dog got up and stretched with front paws extended, ears alert and chest skimming the floor, Mark knew it was time to shut down the laptop and take her for a walk.

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The two of them were strolling through Reynolds one December afternoon, Mark enjoying the wintry sunshine while Jade followed her nose in a joyful zigzag along the stony path, when a fox burst out of a blackthorn copse ahead of them. Jade launched herself in pursuit, her springy back legs propelling her along like a furry golden bullet. Convinced that the fox would outrun her, Mark waited. When the dog did not come back after five minutes, he remembered, with horror, how close the motorway was. Ignoring the brambles clawing at his jacket, he burrowed into the undergrowth, calling 'Jade! Jade!' in growing desperation.

A growl came from behind an elder bush. Mark ducked under its twisted branches and saw that Jade had cornered the fox against the wire fence that formed the boundary of the country park. The two animals were facing each other in a stand-off. At close quarters the fox looked enormous. He was a handsome creature, with a broad white chest, a fine brush and the eyes of a stone-cold killer. Jade had no chance against him, but she was braced for battle, with bared teeth and fur erect along her spine. Mark ran over and grabbed her collar. The big fox slunk away, leaving behind a rank smell, as if he had left a shred of his feral soul hanging in the air.

Mark was so anxious about his pet that it took him a few minutes to realise that he was staring, through the links of the boundary fence, into his own back garden. What had he been thinking of, to leave the door unlocked? A burglar had only to cut a hole in the wire mesh, and Jade would be in Reynolds within seconds. He attached the lead to her collar and marched her back to the path, scolding her all the way, but she only wagged her tail and looked pleased with herself. Hanging around near the gate, waiting to find out what all the noise was about, were three dog people he had spoken to before. As is usual with such contacts, Mark did not know their names, only the names of their dogs.

'We thought Jade had run off and left you!' The speaker was a well-groomed old man wearing a Paisley scarf and a flat tweed cap. He belonged to Molly, a West Highland terrier.

'I was afraid I'd lost her,' Mark said, 'She chased a huge fox. Cornered him. I've never seen a fox with a white front before.'

'I've seen that big male,' said a middle-aged woman in festival wellingtons, whose cockapoo was attempting to swallow a tennis ball whole. 'Gorgeous, isn't he? Leave that, Ziggy.'

'Those urban foxes are getting above themselves. They'll be hunting us soon. Don't roll in that, Sherman.' The miniature schnauzer was wallowing in fox excrement, to the annoyance of his walker, a hipster with a bushy ginger beard.

'I'm more worried about burglars than foxes,' said Mark. 'My house backs on to Reynolds. I could do with someone popping in when I'm not home. Someone who could walk Jade and keep an eye on things.'

The four of them and their dogs strolled out of Reynolds together. That evening, Mark arrived home from the city to find a strange young woman waiting on his doorstep. She was talking to Jade through the letterbox, in a mixture of growls and human endearments, and the dog was whimpering in reply.

'Why isn't she barking?' said Mark.

'She's lonely,' the girl said, with her eyes downcast. 'Would you like me to take her for a walk right now? I'm Vic's friend, Dilly.'

One of the dog people must have sent her, thought Mark, opening the door. But which one was Vic? Molly's owner looked like his name might be Victor. Perhaps Ziggy the cockapoo's Mum was called Victoria. He hesitated, but it was dark and cold, and it had been a long day at the office. 'Yes please,' he said, succumbing to Jade's forceful welcome. When his dog greeted Dilly with equal enthusiasm Mark felt a twinge of jealousy, but told himself not to be foolish. Obviously, it was a good thing that Jade liked her. Willingly, he handed over the lead.

Mark was surprised when Dilly turned down the lane that led to Reynolds. Surely, on a winter's night like this, it was dangerous for a girl and a dog to be on their own in the woods?

When they returned an hour later, Jade's fur trailing cold air, Mark expressed his concern to Dilly. 'Don't panic,' said Dilly, 'It's as bright as day under the motorway lights. Jade and I were perfectly safe, weren't we, darling?'

In order to examine Dilly more closely, Mark led her under the spotlights of his brand new kitchen. She was older than he'd thought in the half-light, about his own age. Her skin was free of make-up and her thick brown hair was dragged back into a pony tail. She wore grubby jeans, scuffed boots and a torn khaki raincoat with patchy fake fur on its hood. Although she was tall enough to look him in the eye, her gaze flickered over the oak dining table, the contemporary window blinds, the rustic floor tiles, anywhere but his face. Mark found her shyness intriguing and, in spite of the doggy odour that wafted from her, he guessed she would scrub up well.

'I'm between jobs right now,' said Dilly, 'So it'll be really cool if I can help you out.'

They agreed on hours and pay, and Mark handed over his spare keys. Dilly said an affectionate goodbye to Jade and left, refusing a cup of tea. It was only when the door closed behind her that Mark remembered he still did not know the identity of Vic, who had recommended her. He did not feel able to ask Dilly for more information, not now that he had employed her. It might make him look foolish in her eyes. He decided that the next time he saw the dog people, he would try to catch their names.

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For the next few weeks, Mark was even busier with work than usual, so he had no opportunity to find out who had recommended his new dog-walker. This did not worry him, because there was no doubt that Dilly had improved the quality of his life. She arrived at seven every morning to take Jade for her first walk, so Mark had time for a leisurely shower and a trawl through social media. At six in the evening, Dilly was back in time for Jade's evening walk. On days when he worked at the office, she also called in at lunchtime. Now that Dilly had entered his life, Mark took Jade out when he wanted to, not because he had to, and he felt like a new man.

Dilly had changed too. She could not yet look Mark in the eye, but she was less jumpy. Her face was rosier and her brown hair shone with rusty highlights. Although she wore the same clothes she had when he first met her, they were now clean, and the fusty smell that had hung around her was gone. When Mark noticed long brown hairs in his brush and a sprinkle of spilled washing powder on the utility room floor, he wondered if he should talk to Dilly about boundaries, but decided against it. If he was honest with himself, the thought of the girl walking around his house naked, brushing her hair while she waited for her clothes to dry, gave him a welcome thrill.

Sometimes Dilly brought food and left it in the kitchen for Mark and Jade to enjoy. Her gifts were nutritious, delicious and wrapped in packaging decorated with yellow labels. When this happened, she refused to accept money in return, and avoided Mark's eyes with even more determination than usual. He relished these offerings, even though he suspected they came from supermarket skips.

At Christmas, Mark took Jade with him to stay with his parents. He asked Dilly for her phone number, so that he could let her know when to expect them back. She said she had no phone. Mark feared this was her way of saying she did not want to look after him and Jade any more, but when they got home, Dilly was sitting in his favourite chair watching TV. Mark wondered if she had spent the holiday in his house, and was surprised to realise that she did not mind if she had.

In late January, Dilly began to look off colour. Her skin lost its healthy glow and her eyes flickered more than ever. Noticing that something was wrong with the girl, who had become important to his comfort, Mark asked her if he could help her in any way. 'No thank you,' said Dilly. 'It's just that I have an anniversary coming up soon. I lost someone very dear to me, almost a year ago. Don't worry, I'm much happier now, and I love looking after Jade.' That was when Mark began to seriously consider asking Dilly out. She was very different from the stylish city girls he had dated

before, but those relationships had all ended badly. Perhaps Dilly was the right woman to help him create the simple lifestyle he had hoped for when he moved to the suburbs.

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One night in February, Mark was woken in the early hours by an unfamiliar sound. He listened, nerves on edge, to the scraping noise. Burglars, he thought, a cold shiver running along his spine, until it struck him that Jade had not barked. Whatever was going on downstairs, she was at the centre of it. The thought of his beloved dog in danger gave him the courage to investigate.

Peering round the half-open lounge door, Mark saw Jade standing on her hind legs with both front paws on the glass doors that opened on to the garden. She was making a low, snuffling noise that was not so much a whimper as a call, to someone or something she desired. Her tail was flailing from side to side with delight, and her soft ears flapped like bunting. Outside, the full moon was illuminating a thick frost on bare branches. Each blade of grass and fallen leaf shone as if it were carved from crystal. Everything in the garden glowed, except for the dark shapes on the lawn. At first Mark thought they were crouching humans, until they moved as one and the bright eyes of five foxes were trained on him and Jade. The largest male stalked towards the house. By his white breast, Mark recognised him as the same fox Jade had cornered in Reynolds.

‘The buggers have come mob-handed. Here, Jade,’ said Mark, but his dog ignored him. When she sat down and pawed at the window as if begging the foxes to come inside, Mark recognised the scraping noise he had heard from upstairs. He tapped on the glass, the foxes turned away and Jade began to whimper. Mark did his best to calm her, but she lay down with her head between her paws and refused to be comforted. When he looked up, the foxes had gone.

In the morning, Mark told Dilly what had happened. ‘Poor things,’ she said, ‘It’s the hardest time of the year for them. They must feel so hungry.’ Big tears ran down her cheeks.

‘I’m sure the foxes can take care of themselves,’ said Mark, fiddling with Jade’s collar to distract himself from a strong impulse to take Dilly in his arms and comfort her.

'I can't help worrying, Mark.'

Touched by her tenderness for the foxes, Mark realised he was falling in love. But how could he let Dilly know how he felt without scaring her away? And he knew nothing at all about her, not even where she lived. He and Jade set out for Reynolds to find Dilly's friend Vic, and it was not long before they met the three dog people he had spoken to on the day when she had turned up on his doorstep. 'Hi, Vic,' he said to no-one in particular. 'Thank you for putting me in touch with Dilly. I was wondering if you could tell me a bit more about her?'

It turned out that the woman's name was Tessa and the man in the flat hat was Trevor. Both of them, they said, had just received messages to say they were urgently needed at home. At once they turned back, dragging their disappointed pets behind them. Mark stuck close to hipster Dan.

'Do you know Dilly?' said Mark.

'Kind of,' said Dan, stroking his beard. 'She used to walk a little ginger dog called Vix.' 'Dilly doesn't have a dog,' said Mark.

'Not any more,' said Dan. 'About this time last year, Vix got through a hole in the fence, on to the motorway. I had to crawl through and dodge the traffic to fetch what was left of the body, then I helped Dilly to bury her. It was horrible.'

'You and Dilly must have been close,' said Mark, 'If you did that for her.'

Dan picked up Sherman, who had been trying to kill a plastic bag, and tucked the little dog under his arm. 'It wasn't me who told Dilly you were looking for a dog walker, if that's what you think. I'm sorry if she's giving you grief. She can be weird.' In spite of Mark's offer to buy him a pint, Dan refused to say any more.

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That night, Mark found it impossible to sleep. Every time he nodded off, he was woken by confused dreams of Dilly's tears, the dead dog, Vix, and Jade crooning to the foxes. At two in the morning he went downstairs to make himself a cup of tea. While he was waiting for the kettle to

boil he realised that, for once, he had not had to step over Jade, who liked to sleep at the bottom of the stairs. The dog was not in the lounge either, and the glass doors that opened on to the garden were wide open. He went back upstairs, threw on his jeans, grabbed a torch and stowed Jade's lead in his jacket pocket.

Out in the garden, he searched behind the shrubs along the wire fence. As he suspected, someone had cut through its links. Why had he not thought of this on the night when the foxes invaded his lawn? He crawled on all fours through the gap, broken wires biting into his flesh. Ahead of him, something gleamed in the dark. At first he thought it was a line of white stones, but when he switched on his torch the beam bounced off tinfoil. A trail of empty dog food sachets stretched out in the direction of the motorway. They were the expensive brand Jade liked best.

Mark took a deep breath, before diving into the thickest part of the wood. Even in daylight the dog people avoided this corner of Reynolds, where the bushes were dense, tree branches hung to the ground and the brambles were untamed, but the thought of Jade alone and in trouble kept him stumbling on. At last, he found himself in a clearing that ran up to the motorway fence, where strong lamps glared far overhead, creating an amphitheatre of light and shade. Above the drone of cars and lorries roaring past on their way into the city, he heard a familiar voice calling him.

'Mark! Over here!'

Under the flyover was a rough tent, made from plastic sheeting, planks and motorway debris. Dilly was peering at him from inside it, holding back the towel that screened its entrance.

'That's one of my towels,' said Mark.

'You've got plenty of towels,' said Dilly, scrambling out of her lair. 'So you won't miss one.' For the first time, she was looking him straight in the eye. It dawned on Mark that this hovel must be Dilly's home, and that it was she who had cut a hole in his garden fence, for easy access.

He said, 'Dilly, did you give Jade's food to the foxes?'

'Yes,' said Dilly. 'Of course I did. They're starving, and she has lots.'

Close to a gap in the motorway fence was a heap of broken paving slabs, stacked to form a dog-sized grave. The sight reminded Mark that Dilly was in mourning for her pet, and in spite of his distaste for her lifestyle, his heart filled with pity.

‘Dan told me about your little dog Vix,’ he said. ‘I’m sorry for your loss.’

‘I don’t talk to Dan,’ said Dilly. ‘It was his fault Vix got run over. He said she shouldn’t be on a lead, because she wasn’t a dog. So he let her loose, and she ran on to the motorway.’

Mark felt his jaw drop. ‘If Vix wasn’t a dog, what was she?’

‘A fox, of course,’ said Dilly. ‘What else did Dan say about me?’ ‘Nothing,’ said Mark. ‘Where’s Jade?’

Dilly moved closer to Mark and took his hand. ‘It’s all over between me and Dan.’ ‘That’s good to know,’ said Mark. ‘But where’s Jade?’

‘Jade’s fine.’ The girl pressed herself against Mark and wound her arms around his waist. ‘You know, inside my tent, I have a really great mattress. It fell off the back of a lorry.’ Dilly was a different person, far more confident, out here in the woods. For a second, the animal in Mark urged him to sleep with her. Why not? I can sack her afterwards, he said to himself.

Immediately, he felt ashamed of himself. Because she’s as crazy as a box of frogs, that’s why not, he thought, and he pushed Dilly away. ‘For the third time, where’s Jade?’

‘Don’t be unkind, Mark. She’s with Rusty. He’s been so lonely since Vic passed, but now he and Jade are very happy together. See for yourself!’

Dilly threw aside the towel. Like an enchantress’ boudoir from some fanciful old painting, the interior of her shack was both sensuous and frightening. Throws and sheets in random designs were pinned against the makeshift walls. Among them, Mark recognised house-warming presents from his friends and family. A fine wall hanging he had brought back from a trip to Morocco was draped across the mattress Dilly was so proud of. On top of it, Jade and the big white-chested fox lay entwined, his paws on her back legs, her nose nuzzling into his brush, as if human lovers had

been bewitched and their shapes changed. It's okay, Mark thought, panic rising in his throat. Foxes and dogs don't mate. It's biologically impossible. Briefly, he felt calmer, until a disturbing question flashed across his mind. Do the dogs and foxes know that, he wondered.

'Jade,' said Mark, with his heart in his mouth. The dog looked at him and her ears pricked up, but she did not stir. 'You have to choose. Rusty or me. You can stay out here with the foxes, or you can come indoors. It's a choice all of us have to make sometime. Freedom, casual sex and scavenging, or a roof over your head, a warm place to sleep and knowing where your next meal is coming from.' He took a few steps away from the tent, in the direction of his home.

Dilly said, 'Don't listen to him, Jadey darling. Rusty needs you,' and the big fox growled. 'It's now or never, Jade.' Mark walked a few more steps away from the motorway, then stopped to look back at his pet. She was standing up now, and watching him. Behind her, Rusty crouched and growled. Feeling around in his pocket, Mark found a biscuit. By good luck, it happened to be a fig roll, Jade's favourite.

The events of the next few minutes happened so fast that when Mark looked back, it all seemed like a nightmare. He held out the biscuit, Jade ran towards him and Dilly squealed with disappointment and anger. The fox leapt into action, following his natural instinct to run away, and raced up the slope, through a hole in the fence and on to the outside lane of the motorway. There was a thud. Mark clipped on Jade's lead and dragged her away. Dilly's desperate screams followed man and dog all the way home.

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The next morning, the first thing Mark did was call an emergency locksmith, to have the locks on his house changed. After that, he arranged to have the boundary fence between his garden and Reynolds repaired. Finally, he went looking for the dog people. Molly and Ziggy welcomed Jade even more warmly than usual. While an extraordinary amount of kissing and tail-sniffing went on, Tessa said, 'Isn't it tragic, what happened to that big fox!'

Mark looked at her in surprise. 'Who told you?'

'Dan's scraping him off the hard shoulder as we speak,' said Trevor. 'What a shame. He was such a splendid animal.'

'You two told Dilly I was looking for a dog-walker, didn't you?' said Mark. 'I wish you'd warned me that she can't tell the difference between a dog and a fox.'

Tessa and Trevor looked at each other.

'I'm sorry,' said Tessa, 'But we meant it for the best. Last year we introduced Dilly to Dan, but it didn't work out.'

'You and Dilly made a nice pair,' said Trevor. 'And it's high time she came indoors.'

That afternoon, Mark took Jade to live with his parents, deep in the countryside, where rural foxes know their place. Within six months, he had let the house backing on to Reynolds and was enjoying a spell at his company's office in Japan. There, he enjoyed the use of a luxurious studio flat on the twenty-second floor. Looking down on Tokyo, he regretted his error in tackling the wilderness. Thanks to Dilly, he now knew he had not even been ready to move down to earth.