

Gingernuts

The kettle clicked off. Eleanor poured boiling water onto the heaped tealeaves at the bottom of a Pyrex jug. While it brewed, she watched a pair of wood ducks shepherding their clutch through a swimming lesson; paddling about on the choppy dam in the paddock beyond the end of the garden.

Lovely weather for it. She smiled.

Rain splattered against the windows, drumming arrhythmically as sporadic gusts of wind turned the droplets to missiles. The storm dashed them against the panes with such force that the fat globes exploded, silvery fireworks against a backdrop of leaden cloud. She fetched milk from the fridge and added it to the tea before decanting it into a thermos through a sieve. They'd had it years that thermos, the once bright red plastic scuffed and dulled, with only parts of the trademark still visible, the cup lid more cream than white. Eleanor screwed the stopper down tight, added the cup, and put it in the basket beside a packet of gingernuts and Fred. She patted the velvet bag.

The car keys were on a hook by the back door. She slipped them into her pocket as she walked through to fetch her waxed coat and Wellington boots from the laundry. Bob's old beanie hung on the end peg. She lifted it down and crammed it into the pocket of her jacket.

You may as well come too.

They had been in town running errands when Bob saw the photo in the window of the IGA. He had been to the post office to check the box and was reading the notices while she finished up the groceries. When she saw it her heart almost broke. An untidy long-haired terrier cross of some kind with the biggest soulful brown eyes she'd ever seen stared out at her from a handmade poster.

'What a sad little scruff of a thing.'

'There's a number.'

'Oh Bob, at our age?'

'We're pretty fit considering.' He grinned. 'Look,' he said pointing, 'free to a good home.'

Underneath it read:

Hi, my name's Fred,
Mum and Dad have lost
their rental and can't
afford to keep me. I'm a
champion ratter and I like
a good walk but I especially
love the beach.

'We could call and see if he's still there.'

'And if he is?'

'Well, we could go and have a look, see what the little fella makes of us.'

'If I go and look, I'll not want to leave him behind.'

'And would that be so bad? You've missed the walking since we lost Candy.'

'I haven't missed her being under my feet in the kitchen,' she laughed.

'Got a pen in that bag of yours?'

A road train hauling logs juddered to a halt as a pair of fluro-clad lads pelted across the high street from the bakery clutching hot pies in white paper bags. One held up a hand, patting the air in the direction of the irate driver, a sheepish grin on his face. As the truck ground forward slowly, splashes of wet soaked the calves of the nearer boy as he stood with his body pressed against the side of his ute, the gap too small to get the door open.

The fuel light was on so Eleanor pulled into the garage. The forecourt was empty, large puddles laying on the uneven surface. She pulled in tight to the bowser and took her purse from the basket sitting on the passenger seat. The roof over the pumps did little to protect her from the wind driven rain. By the time the tank was full her glasses were streaked and steamed up from her warm breath. She polished them with a clean hankie as she walked into the shop.

Dave was behind the counter.

'Morning Ellie, miserable day. Still, we need the rain.'

'Good beach weather.' She laughed at the look of surprise on his face. 'Bob and I loved a stormy day at the coast, it makes you feel alive.'

'Which beach you headed for?'

'Windy Harbour, it was our favourite. Fred loved it too.'

‘I love that drive down through Pemby; you should have it to yourself today. Got a fuel voucher?’

Eleanor fished in her pocket for the slip of paper and handed it over.

‘It’s never very busy, even in summer. Good place for off-roading, the car park usually has someone letting their tyres down or blowing them back up. How are you going with the patches?’

‘Month in now, it’s hard.’

‘Oh I know, Bob tried several times, never managed it. Jennie must be so glad you’ve quit.’

‘Yep, she’s talking about maybe trying for a baby now. That’ll be \$48.74 with the discount.’

Eleanor tapped her card against the machine.

‘That’s a great incentive to keep going. Give her my best and well done.’

‘You take care out there.’

‘I will, there’s no need to rush, I’ve got all day.’

It was the persistent morning cough that had driven Bob to the doctors. Never one to make a fuss, he’d had it six months before Eleanor had managed to nag him into going. The cancer had spread, riddling his once robust body. Quickly it had reduced him to a husk, sallow and stooped, his plaid shirts and work pants hanging loose on a skeletal frame.

Bob lay propped on pillows, the autumn sunshine falling across the bed accentuating the yellowness of his skin. Fred was curled alongside him, head resting in the crook of Bob’s elbow.

‘I wish we’d had kids,’ his voice was hoarse.

‘I know, love.’ She sat in the chair by the bed and took his hand in both of hers. She massaged it gently trying to instill some warmth into the cold papery skin beneath her fingers. ‘Some things are just not meant to be. We’ve had more than our share of good luck in other ways.’

‘Married to my best friend for 43 years. I just hate the thought of leaving you on your own.’

‘I’ll be right, there’s the ladies at the CWA and my book club,’ she squeezed his hand. ‘And I won’t be on my own will I, I’ll have Fred.’ She bent down to fuss Fred’s ears so Bob wouldn’t see her distress.

A slow moving stream of cars trundled past. When a break came, Eleanor joined the flow, a river of red taillights flowing down to the bridge, then snaking up the hill and out of town. The drive to the coast took an hour and a half, but as she headed south and west the sky lightened and the rain eased. The further south she got the taller the trees became. As she turned off for Northcliffe it felt as though she was entering a natural cathedral; the road a narrow aisle between towering ancient giants. Watery sunshine in shafts of misty light broke through the vaulted canopy, limning the immense trunks silver.

The little beachside community seemed lifeless as she drove through and the car park was empty, sand blowing across the tarmac in swirls. Through the gap in the dunes that gave access to the beach via the boat ramp the sea looked angry. Grey-green waves surged up the shallow incline, fountains of white spume flying. Eleanor sat on the boot sill to pull on her wellies and Bob's woolen hat.

She had only realised Fred was sick when he brought up vomit laced with gravel and stringy bits of grass.

'Don't eat it again, you daft brush.' She pushed him gently out of the way and gathered the rough, dry mess into a poo bag.

'Let's have a feel of your tummy.' Underneath the scruffy coat behind his ribs, his sides were concave. She frowned.

'Fred, come and have a drink.' Eleanor walked through to the laundry and stood by his water bowl. He followed her and took a couple of half-hearted laps at the dish and then curled up in his bed.

'You're not yourself are you lad? We'd best get you to the vet.'

Graham had been their vet for years.

'First up, we need to get some fluids into him, but the only way to see what's going on is to do an x-ray, not cheap I'm afraid.'

'You're worth it aren't you mate.' She massaged his silky ear gently.

'I'll ring you when its done. We'll take care of him.'

Eleanor had gone home and cleaned furiously. How had she managed to miss that he wasn't drinking? She thought back, she'd filled the bowl last night and again this morning. He must have been vomiting outside. She went into the garden and

hunted about. He'd been in among the grevilleas and bottlebrushes; she found several piles of sick there.

'Oh, Fred.' Inside the telephone trilled jangling her frayed nerves further.

'Hi Eleanor,'

'From your tone Graham, I guess it's not good news?'

'No, I'm afraid not. Your poor lad's got a blockage. I reckon he's eaten a dead rat or something and it's got stuck.'

'Can you do anything?' Eleanor gripped the corner of the dresser to keep herself upright.

'We can operate but I can't guarantee he'll survive it. He's an old fella and if his bowel is perforated and he's got peritonitis, well...'

'He must have been in so much pain.'

'We've got him on a drip already and he's had some painkillers so he's comfortable. What do you want to do?'

'I want to do what's best for him. What would you do if it was your dog?'

'Honestly, I think it would be kinder to euthanize him, given the situation and his age.'

'I'll come. Have I got time to sort myself out so I'm not a wreck when I get there? The last thing he needs is me being weepy.'

'Take your time, as I said, he's comfortable and he's wrapped up in a nice warm towel. Deb and Paula are fussing him.'

The beach was empty of people. The hard packed sand down near the water was strewn with golden kelp bundled into piles by the tide. Eleanor headed east away from the boat ramp aiming for the far end of the bay. The roar of the ocean drowned out all sound save the cawing of gulls wheeling overhead. The salt tang cleared her head and she breathed in deeply, relishing the sharp cold. Setting her basket down on the sand picked out the gingernuts and ran her thumbnail round the curved edge of a biscuit splitting the wrapper. Then she poured a cup of tea. The hot liquid warmed her hands through the scarred plastic. Overhead scudding clouds barreled across the sky obscuring then revealing the sun by turns. She dipped a biscuit in the tea and sucked on it, the familiar sensation as the softened cookie collapsed into mush evoking memories from as far back as childhood.

She remembered her young self, sitting on the back step with her Mother nursing one of her first cups of tea. They had had the biscuit tin between them. How Mum had laughed as her over soaked gingernut collapsed on the journey from tea to mouth, toppling back into the cup with a soggy plop. She had fished the mush out with a spoon. The way her Dad always made a sandwich out of two stuck together with a thick smear of butter and Bob, dear Bob, craving them still when his desire to eat almost anything else was gone. He'd shared each one with Fred, covering the quilt with crumbs.

She waded into the shallows testing the drag of the current, the little velvet pouch with Fred embroidered on the front heavy in her hand.

Hey Bob, I've brought Fred to keep you company. He's missed you as much as I have these last two years. It's blowing gale but long as I face east, I won't end up wearing him. That would make you laugh wouldn't it? I've been thinking about gingernuts, funny how one thing can come to represent so much over the course of a life. They mean happiness to me, and love. I miss you every day.

Stooping low over the roiling tide, she gently tipped the ashes out of the bag. The swirling waves dispersed them and then carried them out as the swell receded only to be sucked up into another break that caromed ashore.

Be seeing you.