

TIME AWAY

BY LOUISE PAKEMAN.

I was standing at the sink filling the jug for coffee when I saw him turn in at the gate and head for the back door. There was something about his jaunty, confident air that caught my interest, in spite of the self-absorbed agonising that was causing me such inner turmoil. I even smiled slightly as I opened the kitchen door.

He walked straight in and ‘smiled’ at me, just for all the world as if *he* were welcoming *me* to *his* home!

“Hello, there!”

He was an engaging little fellow. Crisp black curls, bright eyes; “Where have you sprung from?”

The grin widened, showing a bright pink tongue; he jumped up on his hind legs wagging his tail so vigorously that the absurd pom-pom at the end was just a blur. In spite of myself I found that I was grinning back.

I looked on his collar, a red, jewelled affair, for some clue to his identity. There was none. I straightened up and he sat down, head on one side, looking at me.

“If this is a social call, you’ve come at the right moment, I’m just about to have a drink.”

As if it had ears the jug boiled on cue. I turned to flick it off.

“How about joining me?”

He seemed to think this was a good idea, and sat down to supervise.

I made my coffee and put out a saucer of milk. In deference to my unexpected guest I opened a packet of sweet biscuits. He cocked his head and wagged his tail in approval.

I guessed he must be from one of the other holiday cottages in the area, he certainly wasn’t a stray. He was far too well fed, well groomed and confident for that. I loved dogs and had a particularly soft spot for small black Poodles for just such a dog as this had been my friend and confidante as a child.

His manners were excellent. He drank the milk without splashing it all over the place and gently took the biscuit I offered from my fingers. He was obviously well brought up and well bred. At first we just ate and drank together in a silence that for me, at any rate, was both friendly and comforting. Then I found myself talking to him; and once I started it seemed I went on – and on.

“I once knew a little dog just like you,” I began. Then, almost before I realised what I was doing, I had told him about my home, and children, now all grown and fled the nest. Soon there was nothing left to tell him, except about Phil. This was something I didn’t want the talk about; because I didn’t want to *think* about it, much less *feel*!

I shut my mouth and looked down into the bright little face turned up towards me. His head was tilted slightly to one side and I swear I could see understanding – and sympathy – gleaming in the dark eyes looking up at me. I felt tears pricking behind my lids and there was a queer sort of quaver in my voice when I next spoke. He gave a sympathetic sigh, dropped his head on his paws and settled down to listen. So I told him.

“Phil – that’s my husband – he wants out – a divorce – he – he wants to end our marriage.” The tears were unashamedly dripping onto my clenched hands. “But I’ve told him – it’s no good, I won’t give it to him!”

I hadn’t really been as reasonable as I made myself sound. In actual fact when Phil had dropped his bombshell I had well and truly exploded. Gone right over the top and just screamed at him that “No way – No way would I *ever* give him one!” I wasn’t very proud of myself and wished I could have spoken to my husband in the same reasonable manner that I could to this little dog.

Phil's temper had matched mine then and he had stormed out of the house, hurling a spate of abuse at me and slamming the door so hard the house seemed to tremble on its foundations. He hadn’t returned and I hadn’t waited for him. Instead I had called Betty and asked her if she meant it when she had offered us their holiday shack in the hills.

“Of course!” she assured me. “It’s empty and we shan’t need it ourselves till early spring.” (It was now late autumn). “It’s yours just as soon as you pick up the key!”

“Tonight?”

I looked down at the dog, he was still lying there with his nose on his paws and his eyes fixed on my face.

“So that’s why I’m here,” I told him. “But what about you?”

He gave a little breath of a sigh, got up and with a small wag of his tail trotted to the door. I followed him and did what he seemed to expect; opened it for him. With another, almost apologetic, wag he trotted out and vanished. Yes, just like that. I must have blinked, or looked the other way or something because one minute he was there on the garden path heading for the gate; the next he was gone.

I opened my mouth to call him back, then shut it again. He must belong to someone, have a home somewhere, I couldn’t in all conscience keep him with me. Anyway, hadn’t I come here to be alone?

Convinced that sleep would not come I went to bed that night armed with a pile of library books, magazines and a portable radio yet curiously enough I found I couldn’t read, not because the printed word didn’t catch and hold my attention but because my eyes refused to stay open. My last conscious thought was of my small visitor who had listened patiently to my tale of woe and in doing so given me so much comfort.

The sun was shining and I surprised myself by feeling almost cheerful. I decided to venture out to the general store. A decision made easier by the fact that I barely had enough milk for a cup of coffee, my guest of the previous day had made greater inroads than I had realised.

“Who has a small black Poodle?” I asked as I placed my selection of basic necessities on the counter.

The storekeeper frowned as he thought. “No-one,” he told me. “Least I’ve never seen one around; and I reckon I know most of the dogs round here as well as the people. Course it could belong to a holiday-maker – though most of those have packed up now for the winter.”

“Well one spent a couple of hours or more with me yesterday,” I told him as I collected my shopping and change. “He seemed to know where he was going when he left too.”

The man behind the counter shrugged. “Must belong to a weekender.”

I thought he was probably right and hoped his family were still here and that he would pay me another visit.

I found myself lingering at the sink that afternoon around the time he had come the day before. But though I kept my eyes on the garden gate, which I had left open deliberately, no small figure trotted through. I felt unreasonably disappointed as I poured the boiling water into the teapot for my solitary cuppa.

Then I heard it, a tap on the door, not loud but quite insistent. I had left the door ajar so that the dog, if he came, could come straight in. But this was a definite knock, not a dog scratch.

Putting down the teapot I crossed the kitchen quickly and pulled the door wide.

A woman round about my own age was standing in the porch. She was attractive and well dressed, though her clothes were a little old-fashioned. She smiled at me in a friendly way. "Hello." Her voice was warm and friendly. "I'm Liz Armstrong. I believe Bumble visited you yesterday afternoon?"

Only then did I notice my little friend standing by her. I glanced down, smiling in spite of myself. He wagged his tail in response.

"I do hope you didn't mind?"

"No. Oh, No! I enjoyed him – in fact I was rather hoping he would come again." I pulled the door open wider. "Now he is here, and you too, won't you come in – both of you – and join me in a cup of tea?"

I felt myself both drawn to and instantly at ease with my visitor, as if she was a close friend of long standing rather than a total stranger.

Bumble lapped his milk, we sipped our tea and ate our biscuits and the silences were as companionable as the conversation.

I felt easy and relaxed even though, or maybe because, we were talking about feelings and thoughts rather than clothes, gossip and social chitchat, the things I discussed with my other women friends. I even found myself talking about Phil – and my marriage – and what was happening to it.

"I always felt we had such a good marriage," I told her. "I mean we were friends as well as lovers. We were just coming up to our twenty-fifth Anniversary – I was looking forward to it, planning a party. Now – well- " I shrugged helplessly.

I recalled a story I had heard recently; told with wry wit by the woman herself. She had got her divorce on the exact anniversary of her Silver wedding. "I bought myself a new hat – to celebrate," she told us.

Along with everyone else I had thought it amusing and laughed at the time. Now it didn't seem at all funny, just sad.

"I hope I don't spend my Silver wedding getting unwed!" I remarked aloud.

My companion smiled gently. "That's rather up to you," she told me.

I was startled. It just hadn't occurred to me that I had much say. After all it was Phil, not me, who had, it seemed found someone else and wanted to end our marriage.

"Up to me – How? - What do you mean? I told you – he has someone else – he wants out." I was surprised, and somewhat shocked, at how abrupt, almost rude, I sounded.

But she didn't seem to notice, or if she did she didn't mind. She simply smiled, that slow compassionate smile that had made me blurt out the whole story to her in the first place. "Are you quite sure?" she asked me now.

"About – what?" I tried not to sound so curt, but I wasn't sure what it was she was asking if I was sure about.

"That he really wants out? That this affair of his isn't just a rather drastic way to get your attention?"

"You make him sound like a small boy," I protested.

"All men are small boys inside," she remarked with a smile. "Just as all women are really still small girls."

I began to splutter a protest. After all I considered myself not only mature but reasonably sophisticated and worldly-wise as well. Small girl certainly wasn't a self-image I was happy with.

"Come now – do you honestly feel any different, inside I mean, the real you, not the bit you let the world see, than you did at sixteen, or five or even two?"

I heard myself gasp. This woman, this total stranger, could see right inside me in a way that no one had ever done before. What was more, she was making me look inside myself and what I saw was indeed a small girl trying awfully hard to be tough and sophisticated in a grown-up world.

To my horror I felt a tightening in my chest, a curious lump in my throat and a pricking behind my eyes. I was bawling like the little girl I had just caught a glimpse of inside myself.

I gulped and looked up at my visitor. Through a haze of tears I saw her framed in the doorway, one hand raised in a farewell salute.

“Wait!” I called. “I – I don’t even know your name.”

She paused, and for a moment I saw her more clearly. “My name is Elizabeth – Elizabeth Armstrong.”

I blinked hard, she was disappearing in that mist again; while I was batting my lids, or something, she must have gone because she just wasn’t there any more, only little Bumble wagging his tail at me and ‘smiling’ in that droll way he had. Faintly, like an echo, a voice floated back to me. “Go back Helen, Go back to Philip before it’s too late!” At least I think that’s what I heard. I must have blinked again because suddenly Bumble had gone too and I was quite alone.

I wasted precious seconds just standing there before I ran out the door, down the garden path to the gate and, shading my eyes from the evening sun peered up and down the road. There was no sign of any living creature, woman or dog, in either direction. How could they possibly have disappeared so quickly? Puzzled, I went slowly back indoors.

I gave an involuntary shiver; the house seemed chill and no longer a warm and welcoming refuge. I tried to think about an evening meal but I couldn’t get my strange visitor’s advice – warning, whatever - out of my mind. Abruptly I abandoned all pretence of thinking about or doing anything. I snatched up my car keys and little else and slammed the door of the cottage firmly behind me.

Day was giving way to night as I turned in at the drive gate. As I swung up the circular gravel drive I saw a light go on in the main bedroom. The one I shared with Phil. As I turned into the double carport my own just switched - on headlights revealed the open boot of Phil’s car – open and stuffed with suitcases.

I didn’t stop to reason why – or what. I just ran for the house. Bursting into the lobby, I collided with Phil heading for the front door. He had a jacket flung over one arm, his keys in one hand and a briefcase in the other.

Time seemed suspended for a heartbeat. Just long enough for me to see the hope and, dare I believe it, love that warmed his eyes before they looked at me with the chill grey blankness I dreaded.

I grabbed him by the sleeve. “What are you doing? Where are you going?” I was shaking his arm and my voice, to my horror, sounded strident, gabbling; I could hear only my pain and panic, none of the love I also felt. “You can’t go!” I wailed in despair.

“Why not? You did.” he countered with irrefutable logic. But he put down the briefcase, if only to pluck my clutching hand from his sleeve.

“I’m back.” Even to my own ears it sounded so like a desperate wail of despair that both hope and pride totally deserted me. For the second time that day I, who prided myself on my self-control, burst into tears.

My whole body was shaking from head to toe, whether from the depth of my feelings or the effort to control them I don’t really know. I gulped and choked out the words I had not said for so long; “I love you Phil!” My voice dropped to a rasping whisper, all pretence of pride in shreds. “Please stay!”

“Helen!” Now he had me by both arms in a grip so hard I winced. His jacket and keys joined the briefcase on the floor. “Do you mean that? Or – or have you been drinking, or something?” His grip slackened and his voice tailed off as he took a step back and looked at me appraisingly.

I should have been up in arms at such a suggestion, but instead I just shook my head. When I dared to raise my eyes to his face I saw he was smiling, ever so slightly.

“No – of course you haven’t. But – I don’t understand – what made you come back?”

“I – I suddenly realised how much I – loved you – how much I would miss you – I didn’t want to lose you!” The last words were a bit muffled as by now I was held tight against his chest.

“Oh God!” he was saying to the top of my head. “In another minute or so I would have gone – for ever. That – business – with Maureen – it meant nothing really. Just a desperate bid to see if I could touch you – to find out if you still cared! Oh my darling – how could we throw away twenty five years and everything we have together so lightly?”

“I – I don’t know,” I mumbled against his chest. But suddenly I knew what we had to do now to try and salvage our relationship, our marriage, everything that was really important – to both of us.

“I’ve left all my stuff at the cottage – ” I looked up into his face; “I’ve paid the rent for another week and your cases are packed - ” I didn’t have to say any more. Feeling a bit unreal I found myself beside Phil in his car heading back up the hillside road.

It was a wonderful week; we didn’t see anyone, not even Elizabeth Armstrong. No – I’m not strictly truthful when I say we saw no one. We did have one visitor; Bumble trotted in briefly one afternoon when I was alone in the kitchen, smiled at me in his inimitable way, wagged his tail and trotted off again. I had the curious feeling that he was checking things out – and was satisfied.

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Betty looked me up and down curiously when I handed the keys of the cottage back to her. “You look – great!” she commented.

“I feel great. It’s been – wonderful!” I told her. Just how wonderful I would leave her to guess.

Betty couldn’t resist probing as we sat opposite each other at her kitchen bench drinking coffee.

“How’s Phil?” she asked with exaggerated innocence.

I knew the question was loaded.

“Great – just great!” I assured her, watching her eyebrows go up in what I conjectured was sceptical enquiry. “We’re planning our twenty-fifth wedding celebrations Hope you’ll come along.”

I knew she was longing to ask for more, to find out what had caused the big change from impending divorce to a silver wedding party; but I wasn’t telling. I slipped down from my stool and headed for the door.

But there was something I wanted to learn. “I met a charming woman up there. She was staying in one of the other cottages, she said her name was Elizabeth Armstrong. Do you know her? She had the cutest little Poodle called -”

My voice tailed off as I realised the effect my innocent chatter was having on Betty. She looked worse than pale round the gills, her mouth was hanging open in a most unbecoming manner and her eyes had gone sort of ‘poppy.’

“D-did you say Elizabeth Armstrong – with – with a little black poodle called Bumble?” she croaked.

I nodded. “You do know her?” I hadn’t mentioned that Bumble was black or even got round to giving his name properly.

Betty was now staring at me in such an odd way that I was quite concerned – for her. “Whatever is the matter? You look as if you’ve seen a ghost!”

She shook her head vehemently. “Not me!” She pointed a shaking finger in my direction.

“What are you talking about?”

Betty put both hands on the bench as if to steady herself and took a deep breath. “I did know Elizabeth – she – she was a delightful person.” She paused and took another deep breath before continuing. “Helen – Elizabeth died nearly six years ago – so did Bumble – they were killed in her car. She was driving down that mountain road away from the cottage – it was hers, that cottage – we bought it after she died. They – they said that her marriage was breaking up and she was pretty cut up about it. Her husband was at the cottage at the time. We all thought they must have had a row and she – took off.”

Now it was my turn to gape; I felt just like Betty looked. In fact I could actually feel the hairs on the back of my neck prickling. Looking back I only feel gratitude and a warm affection and am glad I knew nothing of Elizabeth and Bumble’s story when I met them.

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