

The Now-and-Then Dog

4930 words

The first she knew of it was when Roger bellowed.

They had been dozing after sex and an overdose of margaritas. Roger leapt off the bed, staggered to a corner of the room, and cowered groaning. Ruth also tried to leap off, but there was something wrong with her arms and legs, because she landed on her back on the carpet, and when she managed to roll over found herself on all fours, surprisingly close to the floor. *Literally* all fours. When she looked down at her hands a wave of horror swept through her, freezing her heart. They weren't hands but paws, covered like her arms—no, forelegs—in fur. Silky black fur.

She turned to run and was surprised how natural the motion seemed, head thrust out in front, body parallel to the floor. At the head of the stair she paused until she realised she would have to descend head first. Once again the movement was effortless. But how could she open the front door? Without thinking she found herself on hind legs pressing the lever handle with her paw. A memory of something she had seen must have surfaced. After several panicky attempts she saw the need to extend her claws so she could pull the lever after pressing it.

The door swung open. Her car was in the drive. Roger's wife was at a medical conference in Dublin and wouldn't be back till late, so there was time . . . *Would* be time if she wasn't still on all fours. She stood on hind legs and looked in the wing mirror. She half knew what she would see, but the reality shook her. She felt as if encased in ice. What she saw was the face of a dog.

It was one of those intelligent-looking dogs of indeterminate breed, long-snouted with pricked-up ears. Despite her distress, and the strangeness of being so close to the ground, part of Ruth's mind was focussed. She had always wondered how an animal's mind works. She had read about people transformed and wondered what human thoughts remained. What seemed to happen now was that

her mind flickered—one moment dog, the next human. Dog mind was overwhelmed with unlabelled distress and a mental picture of meat oozing blood. The human mind that succeeded it could use language: hunger!

Human thoughts whirled in wild desperation. Where to go? Not home. Even if she had the keys that were still in Roger's bedroom they were no use. She trotted on and found herself near the town centre. Outside a shop were tilted boxes displaying melons, bananas, courgettes, and carrots. Glancing up at the sign she realised—in human mode—it was a familiar shop, made unfamiliar by her low viewpoint. A smell filled her dog mind, powerful, enticing, from inside the shop. Later she would be aware how limited was her sense of smell as a human.

At the counter a young woman was weighing a roast chicken for a customer. Dog mind's intention was wordless. She sprang, seized the chicken, and rushed out. On the pavement she held down the carcass with front paws and tore at it, enjoying her huge teeth.

She should have gone further to eat. She felt savage blows on her back and flank and heard an unintelligible shout. She clamped her jaws on the carcass and fled, once again without thought. Then shocked back into human mode she tried to picture a place of safety where she could finish the chicken in peace, but was overcome by panic. This is utter horror, my life is destroyed, she told herself. But found she was hurrying along streets whose grassy verges she recognised, until she smelt the very powerful odour of her own glass fibre resin. She hurried into her drive and through into her back garden, and lay panting.

Somewhere she must have dropped the chicken carcass. She rested her head between her paws, the lively smell of grass in her nostrils, and let dog emotions and human emotions alternate. Dog mind had little conception of the future. Human mind was desperate.

She woke from a doze to find she was herself again. The relief was honey in her soul. The last few hours seemed unreal, but her side and buttock still smarted from the beating, and she was naked but for a T-shirt and bra. She remembered being too eager for alcohol-fuelled sex with Roger to strip them off. The rest of her clothes were still at his house. The honey of relief turned acid. Her situation was impossible. Half naked, locked out, unable to retrieve her things before the wife returned . . .

“Ruth? Are you all right?”

Shamshad’s head appeared over the fence. Ruth shrank into a ball, but once again relief was sweet because she remembered her neighbour had a key for emergencies.

“I was attacked,” she said, not without truth. “Please don’t look at me. If you could open my front door, go through and unlock the back, then leave me, I would be enormously grateful.”

“Do you need the police? An ambulance?”

“I’m fine, Shamshad. Please—just see to the doors.”

“I will. Let me know if you need anything else.”

As it turned out the wife’s flight was delayed, so Ruth had time to recover her clothes and car from Roger. Between delightfully smoochy kisses her lover said, “I have to stop drinking, Ruth. I had a truly horrible dream. And when I woke you’d gone. What was that about?”

She had rehearsed a cover story. “When you yelled out I thought your wife was back early.”

“So you streaked naked through town?” The idea seemed to excite him.

“I had spare clothes in my car, which fortunately was unlocked,” she lied.

“Hm. Anyway the dream was horrific.”

“Go on.”

“You turned into a dog.”

She forced a laugh. “Well that, my love, is what happens when you get rat-arsed. Orange juice next time.”

“Here’s to next time.”

So there was that to look forward to.

Each day that passed the horror seemed less real. Life was good. Very good, in fact. She suddenly saw a solution to a problem with her latest sculpture. How could she assemble the parts without the join showing? Easily. She had been thinking in two dimensions instead of three. Now she saw a way forward she could delight in the blemish-free surface of the resin, the colour bold but not strident, the form even more pleasing than in her sketches.

Among her emails was the offer of a commission—a set of exotic fish, lit from inside, for a festival of the sea in Canada. Also a message from her favourite cousin Leonard to say he was safe in Tokyo, having escaped the tsunami Ruth feared might have drowned him. He was about to fly home. Sadly, Leonard’s partner Johnnie *was* drowned.

Too excited and relieved to cook, she ordered a takeaway from a new untried Bangladeshi restaurant. She expected the usual chunks floating in sauce, and was surprised and heartened by the subtle quality. Later she went for a jog round the park, waved to people she knew, got friendly waves back, and that night slept like a sultan.

Yes, life was good . . . until breakfast on Friday.

The oats in her muesli had tasted so oaty, the hazelnuts so nutty, the dates so sweet, the milk so creamy, when the coffee—which reminded her of delightful early mornings in French cafés—got spilled by a jolt of her forearm. With a sudden rush of fear she looked down at that limb. It was so unfair. Any moment she might see dark fur, a paw instead of a hand, claws instead of fingernails.

If it happened once it could happen again. When? In the Golden Lion one evening with her friends Becky and Paula? The shock on their faces! The struggle to get home! Worse, she could be on a flight to Paris, visiting the Musée d'Orsay. What would she do? Run up and down the aircraft? Roam the hostile boulevards? Where would she hide, faint with hunger, until human?

Once again the delicious taste of success in her work, the commission, the relief at Leonard's safety, the pleasant thought of future assignments with Roger, turned sour. The day passed in tension and bitterness, the night in restless anxiety. Next day she tried to work in her cellar, but the joy of creation had gone. She would have liked to drive to a country park, but now would have to stay near home. It was almost a relief when after lunch the transition happened again.

She was on her way to the shops, but had had the foresight to leave her back door open. Having a refuge was worth the risk of burglary. The few people around when it happened were too busy studying phones to notice. She trotted home quickly—the efficiency of canine limbs a rewarding counterpoint to her distress—and lay panting on the living-room carpet. At least if burglars came through the open door she could bite them. But she had forgotten to allow for hunger. She spent a miserable few hours before being restored to human form.

As the weeks passed she noticed a pattern. The transition always happened some time after lunch on a Saturday and seemed to last about three hours. Whatever she was wearing at the time was still on her when she changed back, as well as what was in her pockets. She took to staying in when the change was expected. She bought dog bowls and put out water and cold cooked sausage.

What was most frustrating was that as Saturday noon approached she had to set aside her work. Mixing resin or operating power tools when her hands became paws would be disastrous. She sat waiting, answering emails or playing patience, the laptop safe but awkward on a coffee table instead of her knee. The relief when dog time was over was refreshing and relaxing, but after a day or two she began to dread the approaching weekend. She wondered why it was happening to her. Why, when everything else was going so well? Why this horrible great bluebottle in the sweet-smelling ointment?

The hardest occasion was Becky's daughter's wedding. Becky was her oldest friend so she couldn't refuse. The ceremony was at eleven on a Saturday morning. Ruth hoped it would be over by noon, but if not she could slip away claiming a headache. She had booked the hotel where the reception was held, so all she had to do was retreat to her room, hang the DO NOT DISTURB sign, and watch Columbo and Judge Judy on TV.

The afternoon dragged horribly. The Columbo plot was predictable: whoever the Lieutenant showed a fascination with, that was the killer. As for Judge Judy, Ruth had no sympathy with the trivial predicaments of either plaintiff or defendant. Try being changed into a dog, she thought. At least she had filled the washbasin with cold water and unwrapped the biscuits provided with the tea and coffee. If any staff did come in they might complain later that no dog was mentioned when booking, but that was a minor worry.

The transition happened frustratingly late. Most of the time she stayed in dog mind. At one point she heard the bedside phone ring and was so annoyed she swiped the handset off with her paw. Restored to human form she looked at the clock, whose face had been unreadable. The reception would have started. She showered, brushed her hair, and hurried down. Becky greeted her with a glass of champagne.

“Get that down you, kiddo. How are you doing? I phoned because I was worried, so I’m sorry if I woke you.”

“You didn’t wake me. Sorry I’m late down.”

“You look a bit rough.”

“I’m fine.”

“Well at least you won’t have missed my excellent speech, haha.”

Ruth was so happy to have hands to shake with and smooth cheeks to be kissed on she drank glass after glass of champagne and stuffed herself with canapés. She felt wonderful, managed to stay awake for the speeches and toasts, then hurled herself around the dance floor as if she was twenty, thanking evolution for making the descendants of apes stand upright.

One event that should have sweetened her life was a visit from Leonard. The transitions tainted it. Everything could so easily have been perfect. Her favourite cousin was ten years older and always made her feel good about herself. He showed a critical interest in her work, and challenged her to take nothing for granted and ask incisive questions.

They spent a really pleasant day in a botanic garden. They strolled along gravel paths between borders bright with red azaleas, lured by long vistas. Geometric beds filled with colour were enclosed by clipped hedges. They spoke at length about Johnnie.

Leonard said, “Thank you, Ruth. I so needed to talk about him. People think they’re sparing me by ignoring the tragedy, but grieving, remembering, is where I am and where I need to be.”

He recalled that before the tsunami he had become enthusiastic about haiku.

“I’ve realised how they often treat the last line. Almost like the caption to a picture.”

“Give me examples.”

“Okay. Last lines from three haiku: ‘The summer moon.’ ‘The fireflies.’ ‘The willow in the garden.’ None of those lines quite belongs to the previous two.”

Ruth studied her cousin’s profile, his intense expression. She smiled.

“Are the poets saying, ‘Yeah, okay, there’s that, but also—hey, look at this’?”

“Exactly.” Leonard sighed. “I’m glad you’re so perceptive, Ruth. But . . .”

“But?”

They had reached a walled enclosure with a rectangular pond and fountain as its centrepiece. There were borders of herbs labelled with their uses. They sat on a bench listening to the sprinkling of the fountain.

Leonard said, “You’re not yourself, are you.”

“Is it noticeable?”

“It is to me.”

Ruth ran her hand along the armrest of the bench, seeking reassurance from the smoothness and firmness of the wood. Should she tell him what was happening? It was too shameful, too inexplicable. And she realised to her horror that today was Friday, he was going to stay at her house, and her pleasure at having set up the guest room for him, even placing a vase of tulips, was blown apart, because she would have to find an excuse to send him away before noon. The day, the sunshine, the scent of herbs and blossom, the soothing sound of the water, were spoiled.

She said, “I can’t talk about it.”

“Are you sure? I hate to see you like this. You were in great form when I left for Japan.”

A pain in her lower abdomen, which had been in the background since breakfast, now intensified. She leaned forward. Leonard put a hand on her shoulder.

“Maybe it’s too difficult with family. Would you like to talk to someone else? Someone wise?”

Ruth looked at a magnolia tree covered in perfect white blossom. If she was a poet she could write a haiku—two lines about the horror of turning into a dog, the last line simply ‘The white magnolia.’

“Who do you suggest?”

“Leave it with me, Ruth.”

To her relief—but great sadness—next day Leonard left mid-morning of his own accord.

“You’ve got a dog!” he exclaimed, noticing the bowls Ruth forgot to clear away.

“It . . . it hasn’t arrived yet.”

“A companion will be good for you.”

He grinned, a little indulgently, she thought.

The transition came more or less as usual. She bounded up the stairs and curled up on her bed. When her mind was in dog mode the experience wasn’t unpleasant. But when it flickered to human mode she watched the patch of sunlight on the wardrobe and longed for it to shrink as the sun went down, when at last she could be herself again.

The nun smiled and nodded. Ruth stared at her. Her socks in her open sandals were the same orange-brown as her robes, which Ruth thought a bit fussy, annoying even. Also annoying was the good shape of her shaved skull, whereas Ruth knew that shorn of her own graying locks her head would have enough lumps to entertain a tribe of phrenologists.

She said, “No reaction? I’ve just told you I keep turning into a dog. Maybe you didn’t hear.”

“I heard, Ruth. I can see it upsets you.”

Ruth thought, Is that all? Not shocked? Of course, these nuns think everything is an illusion, so to them it makes no difference.

The nun said, “It’s not a unique phenomenon. I seem to remember a similar case in Thailand.”

“When, Sister?” (Leonard had told her to call the nun ‘Sister’ and make namasté every time she spoke to her, which seemed excessive.)

“The century before last, I think.”

Also annoying was that the nun didn’t have the pleasing caramel-coloured Buddha-like features Ruth had expected, but despite her name being something unpronounceable was pale with freckles and had a Northern Irish accent.

“So what can I do?”

The nun raised her eyebrows, or where her eyebrows should have been.

“Do what you’re doing,” she said.

“Just like that?”

The nun grinned. “Just like that.”

“But Sister, I’m suffering.”

“Of course. Suffering is the human condition.” She smiled. “The canine condition too.”

“But I don’t know why it’s happening.”

The nun nodded and adjusted her robe, a gesture Ruth thought unnecessary.

“Yes. The workings of karma are said to be hard to fathom.” (She pronounced it ‘kamma’, another annoying trait.)

“Karma?”

“Maybe in a previous life—or *this* life—you treated someone like a dog.”

Ruth suddenly felt hot. She remembered Rex, deeply, deeply hurt when she walked out saying, “Sorry love, you’re fun to be with but boring as hell in bed.” She remembered her ex-husband Mike wanted children, while she didn’t because they would interfere with her work. Now, she envied Becky having a lovely daughter.

The nun looked at her calmly, waiting.

Ruth said, “Yes. I did. My ex—”

The nun held up a hand. “I don’t need details. You’ve caused suffering in the past, now just don’t cause any more. Live! Accept how things are.”

“But that’s it, I can’t! Everything would be great if it wasn’t for the dog times. My work is going really well, I’m fit, I enjoy walks, I enjoy food, I’m getting . . .” she decided not to mention Roger. “It’s all so good it’s frustrating that it’s spoiled. Tainted. Poisoned.”

“As a dog, have you shat or peed on the carpet?”

“No!”

“Well that’s something. Breakfast this morning tasted good?”

“Yes!”

“And the sculptures for the sea festival?”

“Turning out better than I expected.”

A long pause. The nun regarded her with a kindly expression.

“All I can say, Ruth, is—be glad the results of karma are coming to a head, like a boil ready to be lanced.”

“But when will it clear?”

The nun shrugged and spread her hands. “Who knows? Maybe it’s a warning. Take care to avoid rebirth as a dog. Meanwhile your unhappiness is entirely due to attachment. Enjoy your food, your work, your . . .” she narrowed her eyes. “Whatever else, but—let go of it all.”

“Thank you, Sister.”

She managed a convincing namasté, then fled from the unsettling flowers, incense, and Buddha statues of the vihara.

When Leonard phoned to ask how the interview went, Ruth said, “Annoying.”

“Oh damn. Well at least it provoked a reaction.”

“You could say that about swallowing bleach.”

Leonard laughed. “How are you in yourself?”

“The bellyache has flared up again.”

“Painful?”

“Distracting. And worrying. Could be serious.”

“See the quack, Ruth. No point just worrying.”

Next day she phoned for an appointment.

The receptionist said, “Nothing free until the end of the month.”

“Damn.”

“Oh, hang on, I’ve found a cancellation. Can you make ten thirty tomorrow?”

“Yes indeed. Who with?”

“Dr Wilson.”

Ruth took a deep breath. “Thank you,” she said.

Her appointment was with Roger’s wife.

So far she had avoided seeing her. Now fate had intervened. Lying on the couch, trousers undone, edge of her knickers down to just above her pubic hair, Ruth felt like a cornered fox. She broke into a sweat when Dr Wilson palpated her abdomen. The action was disturbingly like

Roger's when he wriggled his hand towards her private parts. The doctor's own parts, inches from Ruth's face behind the zip of her neatly pressed trousers, would be so familiar to him.

A horrid voice in her head whispered, "What if she knows? One quick move and she'll have you by the short and curlies." Ruth felt like retorting, in the manner of Falstaff, "Hang her, poor cuckoldly wench!"

When Dr Wilson said, "Okay, you can do up your jeans," sweet relief. Sitting in the chair next to her desk, Ruth studied her as she tapped her keyboard. She thought the doctor looked very like Meghan Markle. Which seemed logical, because dealing with unruly symptoms was like dealing with the royal family. A misdiagnosis was like a public relations foul-up . . .

Dr Wilson interrupted Ruth's search for comparisons. "Okay, I'm referring you for endoscopy."

Relief at not having her pubic hair pulled made Ruth lightheaded. "Is it called that because they shove a tube up your end?"

Dr Wilson laughed. "They shove it gently. With a local anaesthetic."

"From the street market?"

"Ha ha. You're on form today, Mrs Green. *Endo*, of course, is Greek for 'within', as in endocrine and endoplasm."

"Endearments?"

Dr Wilson slapped her own forehead theatrically. "Thank you, Mrs Green!"

She was relieved when the Doctor and Roger went on holiday to Costa Rica. Embarrassment brought on by meeting her lover's wife faded. Also she felt free to notice other men in the street, in shops, on art websites and YouTube, and thought how grand it would be—if the results of

endoscopy weren't disastrous—to make love to someone who combined the crude voluptuous nature of Roger with the incisive insight of Leonard.

The stomach ache, and accompanying anxiety, didn't stop her working. But as weekends approached her concentration waned. Thoughts of Saturday afternoon invaded her mind. If only it wasn't happening! She could be so so happy!

One Friday this was brought into sharp relief. She had a call from a gallery owner.

“Ruth? Hi. It's Anita with good news. I've sold your *Ozymandias*.”

“My who?”

Anita laughed. “Sorry, that's my nickname for him. Your *Standing Lover II*.”

“Oh! That's great, Anita.”

She made coffee in a glow of satisfaction and accompanied it with date and walnut cake. The glow quickly faded. She thought, My most important piece sold, which should put me on top of the world, and yet tomorrow I'm a dog. It's so unfair. She tried for the rest of the day to milk the sensation of success, but it had soured. Clinging to satisfaction that was no satisfaction, yet unable to let go, she was stuck halfway.

“I've had the results of your endoscopy,” Dr Wilson said. “Nothing dire, you'll be glad to hear. Just diverticulitis.”

“A diver inside me? Phew.”

Dr Wilson looked up from writing a prescription and grinned. As if amused by a joke the Queen made, Ruth thought.

“Small pouches in your intestines get inflamed. I'm prescribing a high-fibre diet supplement, but you also need to get plenty of fibre.”

She handed Ruth the prescription and studied her face. “You seem about to say something.”

Ruth thought, I ought to ask if she enjoyed Costa Rica, but then she’ll wonder how I know she went. Damn, I really like the woman, and there’s me fucking her husband.

She felt herself blush.

“No, nothing,” she said. “Just . . . well, relieved. Thanks, doc.”

“Do you get much fibre?”

“Loads. Glass fibre.”

The dark brows of Dr Wilson knitted hard above wide eyes.

“I’m a sculptor,” Ruth explained.

Dr Wilson burst out laughing. “You had me there, Mrs Green!”

It would be nice to say Ruth began to love being a dog. But no. She always hated it, hated having to hide, being unable to answer a phone or pursue human tasks, and dreaded the transformations even though they were expected. She wondered how the transition would look to an observer watching her jaw extend, her skull flatten, a tail grow from her buttocks.

Just as in canine form she found herself switch from human mind to dog mind, when settled in human form she sometimes experienced a switch between busy mind and—would it be pretentious to call it?—zen mind. One morning she suddenly noticed—*really* noticed—the clematis on a trellis in her back garden, the massed pink flowers against a backdrop of pale tangled stems, the stems themselves standing out against a matrix of dark foliage. They are beautiful, she thought. And they are *mine*, ha ha! But in a week or so—oh no!—they’ll fade. Then she laughed aloud, a deep belly laugh, because that wasn’t ‘letting go’, was it?

She began to notice that she was always thrusting forward in her mind, always thinking what she would do next, never able to savour the moment. She thought a dog might be able to be *in* the moment. But when she *was* a dog her human mind kept intervening, desperate to be human again.

One day, seeing the piece she was laying up release cleanly from the mould, instead of rushing to the next stage, worrying whether it would fit nicely to the other pieces, she simply held it to the light, enjoying not only the smooth curved outer surface but also the inner with its texture of glass-fibre mat embedded in resin. She thought, I, Ruth, made this, but who *is* Ruth? Sometimes she's a dog. Her life is imperfect, and yet even if this piece doesn't fit and has to be re-done, this moment with the morning sun lighting the spider web on the cellar window *is* perfect.

She had always seen her days as coloured beads on a thread receding clearly into the future. Now she began to see each day as simply an addition to past days, like the stones of a cairn. Or maybe the bow wave of a ship sailing into fog.

She arranged to meet Roger for coffee in town.

She said, "Listen, dear, I'm very sorry but I need to stop seeing you."

"*What?*"

His eyes went very wide and his mouth fell open with a flash of gold crowns.

Ruth said, "Thing is, I don't feel comfortable with it any more."

"You don't feel comfortable?" he grated. "What you really mean is you're getting it on with one of those young naked models you meet at life drawing."

"I don't bother with life drawing any more."

"So you say. I don't get you. Bitch! Queen of bitches!"

Ruth found this description surprisingly appropriate. But thought of throwing coffee in his face.

“Roger, listen. Things have changed. I’ve been seeing your wife.”

“*What?*”

He ran his fingers through the waves of his hair then took a large swig of coffee, which must have gone the wrong way because he coughed violently.

“You creep, you’re not bisexual,” he spluttered.

“Seeing her about my bellyache.”

“Bellyache? What bellyache? You’ve never mentioned a bellyache.”

“Because I was worried, and talking would have made it real. Anyway it’s not serious, she said it’s diverticulitis.”

“Never heard of it.”

“Thing is, Roger, I’ve begun to really like the woman. Which makes me feel awful about . . .”

“About fucking me.”

He drained his coffee and pointed a long index finger.

“Well here’s the thing, lady.” (He liked old gangster films.) “You dump me, I’ll tell my wife about our affair and she’ll forgive me, because I’ll say you got me blind drunk after your art appreciation class and seduced me. Yeah? I’ll say you only run the class so you can hit on vulnerable men. I’ll tell the university and you can kiss goodbye to doing evening classes. My wife will bar you from her practice and you can take your bellyache somewhere else if they’ll have you.”

It was the longest sentence she had ever heard from him. His response didn’t surprise her, though its vehemence did. She remembered how he sometimes said, “Oh, Ruth, this is too good,”

and wondered whether anything could be *too* good. She thought, Yes, I've always sought perfection, and yet if my life really was perfect it *would* be 'too good to be true'. Unreal. So I need the grit in the oyster shell.

Meanwhile there was this problem.

She said, "It's your bedroom, dear. I feel Dr Wilson's presence hovering."

"You said you like the bedroom. You said you read a story by John Upton—"

"Updike."

"—about the joy of sex enhanced by seeing the lover's bedroom."

Ruth made a dismissive gesture.

Roger stroked his cleft chin thoughtfully. "Okay," he said suddenly, "I'll come to you. I'm not giving up."

There was a very long pause.

"Well?" he said. "You're away with the fairies. What are you thinking?"

Suddenly decisive, Ruth said, "Okay! I'm free Saturday. We can have lunch, and then . . ."

"You see? Problem solved. Get the cocktails ready."

"Cocktails after."

"Why?"

"Don't you find me attractive if you're sober? That's not much of a compliment." She reached across and took his hands. "And afterwards, please don't get so drunk you start seeing visions."