

A SMALL DOG WITH A BIG HEART

I. The Room

There are, I think, two kinds of darkness. The first is merely the absence of light, and any candle can defeat it. The second sort no candle touches, for it is not in the room at all, but in the heart of the one sitting inside it. It was this second darkness that had settled upon Marie's small house on the evening our story begins, and it had nothing whatever to do with the hour of the day.

She sat in a chair that had grown the exact shape of her over many years, and in her arms she held a bundle wrapped in a towel that had, until the night before, been a small, fat, and entirely disreputable dog named Oliver. Outside, the world went on being the world, as it has a rude habit of doing even on the worst days of our lives. The postman went by whistling a tune he had no doubt whistled a thousand times before. A pair of butterflies, who knew nothing of grief and would not have understood it if they had, tumbled over one another above the weeds of the garden, which Marie had once kept tidy and now could not find the heart to touch. All of this went on outside the window, faint and far away, like a play being performed for an audience that had already gone home.

For here is a strange but true thing about the worst kind of sorrow: it does not merely visit the heart, it evicts everything else that lived there. Marie did not think, "I have lost my dog." She thought nothing so orderly as that. She only knew that something which had been holding her whole self together — she could not have said what, or how, only that it had been there and now was not — had gone out of the room with Oliver, and had not come back in.

If you have never loved a small, foolish, large-hearted animal, you will perhaps wonder that a grown woman could be brought so low by the death of a dog. But those who have loved one will not wonder at all. They will only nod, and perhaps look away for a moment, remembering.

II. The Valley Road

Now I must ask you to leave Marie's darkened room, though I promise we shall return to it, and follow instead a road that no map of this world has ever shown, because it does not run through this world at all.

It was a valley, green from wall to wall, and down the whole length of it ran a path of pale stone that seemed to have been laid there on purpose, though by whom the story does not say. At the far end of the valley — so far that it might have been miles or might have been no distance at all, for the geography of that country does not work as ours does — the sun stood on the rim of the world, and it was impossible to tell whether it was rising or setting. Both, perhaps. In that country such things need not be decided the way we decide them.

Along this path came Oliver, trotting on legs a good deal shorter than he would have liked, and carrying a body a good deal rounder than any dog strictly requires. He was tired, but it was a good tiredness, the kind that comes after a swim on a hot day, and not the tiredness of the sickbed he did not remember leaving. Something in him — not his mind, which was a simple and honest mind and never troubled itself with directions — knew without being told that he must go on toward the light. He did not know why. He only knew it the way a compass needle knows which way is north, without ever having been taught geography.

He was not alone on the path, though he did not yet know it. The valley was thick with green, and the green was thick with living things: rabbits that did not run so much as vanish, birds that scattered up out of the grass like sparks off a fire, small quick creatures with bright eyes that watched him from the shadows of leaves too large for their stems. Oliver, being a dog and not a philosopher, could not resist the greater number of these, and broke off his solemn journey more than once to hurl himself joyfully into the underbrush after a rabbit he had no hope of catching and, if truth be told, no real wish to.

III. Olive

It was in the midst of one such excursion that he heard the sound of running feet on the stone path behind him — feet far surer and faster than his own — and turned just in time to be knocked flat on his back by something that struck him with the force of pure joy.

It was a dog. And Oliver knew her before he had even got his feet back under him, knew her by her smell before his eyes had made proper sense of her shape, for smell is a truer sense than sight and does not lie the way eyes sometimes do. It was Olive. His sister. Who had died three summers before he had, and whom he had mourned in the simple, wordless way that dogs mourn, by sniffing

at the empty half of the bed for a good many nights afterward and finding, each time, that it remained empty.

It was not empty now. She was warm and solid and entirely herself, and the smell of her drove out, all in a moment, the fainter and more sorrowful smell that had clung to him — the smell of the bed he had shared with no one else since she left it, the only bed he had ever known.

She did not stop to explain herself, for dogs, wiser than us in this one respect, rarely feel the need. She ran a great circle around him, then set off again down the path, and Oliver — his tiredness quite forgotten — went after her as fast as his legs would carry him, which, to his own great surprise, was faster than it had been in years.

They ran together for what might have been miles, until Olive turned suddenly off the main path and down a narrow trail that wound through trees Oliver did not remember and yet felt, somehow, familiar. The trail broke open all at once into a clearing, and Oliver stopped dead, his heart — such as a dog's heart is, which is to say, entirely and without reservation — nearly stopping with it.

IV. The Pond

It was their pond. The very one, with the same lazy ducks paddling in slow circles, the same fat squirrels arguing in the branches above, the same patient old koi drifting like copper coins through the green water below. How many afternoons, in another life that now seemed to Oliver both impossibly distant and closer than his own paws, had he and Olive lain shoulder to shoulder on this same bank, watching those same fish, wanting nothing else in all the world?

Olive went to the water's edge and stood there, quite still, looking down into it with an intentness Oliver had never before seen in her. He came and stood beside her, their shoulders touching exactly as they used to touch, and wished, the way one wishes for very few things in life with one's whole self, that this moment might simply go on, and on, and on, without end.

But it was not given to him to have his wish, at least not in the way he had imagined it. For as they watched, something began to rise from the dark water below — not a fish, though at first it moved like one, swimming upward with increasing speed — and when it broke the surface Oliver saw that it was not a fish at all, but a small shining thing, shaped like nothing so much as a heart, and glowing as though a candle had been lit inside it and left burning.

It struck him full in the chest and knocked him clean off his feet.

He scrambled up at once, shaking himself, looking this way and that as any sensible dog would upon being struck by a glowing object rising out of a pond. But the strangeness passed almost as quickly as it had come, and in its place spread a warmth he had no words for, being a dog, and would not have had words for even if he had been a man, for some things do not fit into words no matter whose mouth is doing the fitting. Olive was there before him, nose to nose, exactly as she had always been. And Olive was also, somehow, within him, exactly as she had been before she died — not gone, not replaced, but simply there twice over, in two places at once, the way that only love, and no other thing in any world, is able to be.

V. The Grey Wind

Olive did not linger by the pond, glorious as it was. She turned back toward the main path, and led the way once more, and Oliver found, when he broke into a run behind her, that his legs no longer ached at all, but carried him over the ground with an ease he had not felt since he was a small puppy tumbling after his mother for the first time.

It was Olive who stopped first. Oliver, coming up beside her, found her standing rigid on the path, every hair along her spine on end, a low and terrible whine coming from her throat — a sound he had heard from her only once or twice before, and never without reason.

He looked where she was looking, back down the path the way he himself had come. A wind was rising there, though nothing in that gentle valley had stirred a wind before, and in the heart of the wind walked a shape — grey, and vast, and without any kindness in it that Oliver could see — advancing toward them with the terrible patience of something that has never once needed to hurry.

Olive did not run. This must be understood clearly, for it is the whole heart of what she did next: she planted her four feet upon the stones of that path and barked at the advancing grey thing with everything that was in her, as if the whole of her small body might somehow be enough to slow it.

And Oliver understood, all at once and without being told — the way dogs understand the one or two things in life they are given to understand perfectly — what it was he carried, and what he now must do with it. Not fight. Not defend. Only run. Run for Olive, standing her ground behind

him. Run for the small warm light he now carried inside his own chest, the light that was not only Olive's but had somehow become, in that instant, larger than either of them. Run for the woman he had left behind in a dark little room, holding a towel, believing that every good thing had left the world along with him.

VI. The Arms Outstretched

If it had been only a race to the light, I do not think Oliver would have won it. He was, after all, a small dog, and not built for racing anything, let alone a grey wind that did not tire. But it was not only a race, and something in that country understood this better than the wind did.

For as he ran, carried faster than he had ever run in his life, he caught upon the air behind him — mixed strangely in with the cold breath of the wraith behind — a warmer smell, achingly familiar, that he had not smelled since the towel had been wrapped around him. Marie!

He did not look back to see how close the grey shape had come. He did not dare, and in any case there was no need, for the path ahead of him was suddenly no longer empty. A figure of a woman stood in it, her arms already flung wide before he had reached her, as though she had been standing that way and waiting for him for some while. A light was kindling in her — Oliver saw it plainly, the way only a dog's eyes, uncomplicated by doubt, can see such things — beginning somewhere in the center of her chest and spreading outward from there, to her hands, her face, the very ends of her hair, until she stood entirely wrapped in a warm and steady glow.

Oliver launched himself the last few feet into that light, into those arms, and in the same instant felt, from directly behind him, one gentle hand laid briefly upon his back — not to seize him, but only, it seemed, to send him on his way. And then the whole world, valley and path and pond and grey wind together, folded up and was gone.

VII. What a Good Boy

The first thing Oliver knew, coming back to himself, was Olive's tongue against his ear, and Olive herself dancing from paw to paw around him in that particular fever of joy that only a dog fully given over to happiness can manage, with no thought spared for dignity.

The second thing he knew was two hands, gentler even than Olive's greeting, reaching down and lifting him up. And there above him, her face doing the complicated thing that human faces do when great sorrow and great joy arrive at exactly the same moment and cannot be told apart, was Marie, his beautiful Marie.

"What a good boy," she said, and her voice broke clean in two on the word boy, though whether from laughing or from weeping it would have been hard for anyone to say, even for Marie herself.

It did not matter which. Some things, once a heart has carried them far enough, stop needing to be sorted into one kind of feeling or the other. They only need, at last, to be carried home.