

The Mistress's Dog

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The night wind tugged at the house and slammed against the windows. Nola drank a glass of dry sherry, ate honey nougat and slices of camembert on poppy-seed crackers, and watched TV. The mistress's dog lay on her lap, snoring and twitching. Once he looked up, gazing at her with milky eyes. Then he lowered his head again.

At half past ten she prodded him. 'It's time for final ablutions,' she said. 'I want to go to bed.' She picked him up and put him on the floor. Then she unlocked the patio door. The mistress's dog padded behind her, his nails making clicking sounds on the tiles in the passage. The wind had died down a little, but still pushed against them as they made their way down the steps and into the garden. The smell of the sea was strong. Above them loomed the dark mass of the mountain. The mistress's dog sniffed the damp paving-stones and stumbled against a pot-plant. 'Hurry up,' she said to him. 'It's cold.' After a while he lifted his leg against a fuchsia. 'Thank you,' she said. A dog barked in the distance. The mistress's dog barked in response, a shrill, reedy sound. He made scratching movements in the grass with his back legs. Nola carried him indoors.

She fed him again. He spent a long time hunched over his plastic bowl, but ate little. Most of his teeth were gone. His diet, for the last five years, had consisted exclusively of soft food. He suffered from chronic halitosis – or, to be more accurate, others suffered from halitosis in him. There was nothing that could be done about it.

He slept in a basket – which had accompanied him when he flew from Johannesburg, seven years ago – at the foot of Nola's bed. He followed her to the bedroom and hopped into it. She read for twenty minutes and then switched off the light. The dog's sandpaper breath rose and fell in the darkness. Occasionally he whimpered – but whether in the gratification of a dream or the rasp of its disappointment, she could not tell.

Nola had always preferred cats to dogs.

The mistress was considered attractive according to the fashion of that time. But for Nola there was always too much of her – too much laughing, too much heartiness, too much peroxide, too many teeth. Nola's word for her was 'blowsy'. Sometimes she described her as 'blond and blowsy' because she liked the demeaning effect of the alliteration. At other times she just said 'blowsy', confident that the two syllables would hold sufficient scorn.

The mistress thought of herself as bold, daring, unconventional. And in the context of the poor, religious, rural family she came from, she was. She remained single, devoted herself to

what she called her 'career' (she was a powerful man's secretary), and had an affair that endured for over a decade with a married man (that same powerful man). She bought a flat, bought a vermilion car, bought the advice of an interior decorator, bought elocution lessons, bought cookery lessons, bought Italian olive oil, bought crushed garlic, bought tickets to the ballet, bought the records of Callas and Caruso, bought sunglasses that resembled the ones Callas used to wear.

She severed all contact with her family. She never went to church. But in the unfettered darkness of night (the mistress was a chronic insomniac), she would sometimes weaken and, ashamed of her weakness, beg God to look indulgently upon her and at least understand her rebellions, even if He could not condone their sinfulness. She wanted God to know that she longed only to be free. She asked God to consider what it meant for a woman like her to have to live in the crimping South Africa of the 1960s.

The powerful man who was her boss and her lover saw her as spirited and strong. She excited him for seven years. She interested him for another five. Then she neither excited nor interested him. But Nola (who was married for over forty years to that same powerful man) sensed that the mistress, for all her bravado, was a fearful person. She understood that, although she presented herself as independent, flagrantly independent, she was in fact frightened of being alone, terrified – to the point of obsession – of abandonment.

Sometimes the mistress invited Nola and her husband to her flat for dinner and Nola would feel obliged to admire the food, the wine, the work of the interior decorator. She would pat the mistress's little dog. (There was a succession of small, yappy dogs over the years; the mistress was never without one.) But she preferred cats to dogs. And the food was always a little too oily, a little too salty, the wine too sweet, the flat too cluttered. Nola saw in the mistress the hesitation that the hearty laugh could not hide, the timorousness that was silent but present all the time, like a heart murmur. It was evident to her that the mistress had become a snob largely because she dreaded the judgement of snobs.

In everything she did and said, the mistress declared her determination to be free. She was, she believed, making and remaking herself. It was very hard work. It was expensive too. But it would be worth it if, by chipping away at herself, she could set herself free forever: a complete metamorphosis.

Nola knew, however, that the mistress had not even begun to emancipate herself. And she suspected that she never would. For she, Nola, was not free either, except from anxieties about money. She knew what the mistress had not yet discovered, which was that nothing grew in the shadow cast by the powerful man.

But it didn't make her sympathetic to the mistress's predicament. 'Blowsy,' she would say. 'Blond and blowsy.'

The next morning the sun shone, but the wind was cold. The mistress's dog, after performing successfully the first ablutions of the day, slept on a rug in the lounge, in a patch of sun. He was less wheezy than he had been during the night, but his breathing was shallow. He lay so still that whenever Nola walked past him, she bent over to see whether or not he was dead. But each time,

she heard the tenacious little breaths, saw the rise and fall of the scrawny belly.

She would have liked him to die like that, during his sleep – not because she wished him gone, but because she lived in dread of having to have him euthanased. The vet was prepared to do it at any time: the mistress's dog, he said, was at least eighteen years old, almost toothless, almost blind, more than a little deaf, suffering from heart failure. She need have no qualms, the vet told her. It would be perfectly appropriate; even humane. But Nola couldn't bear the responsibility. She didn't want the needle to do its work at her prompting. She clung still to the hope that the life of the mistress's dog would end of its own accord. She didn't want to have to choose the moment of extinction, to say 'today is the day; now is the time'.

Was she keeping him alive, she wondered, simply because she was too cowardly to make that choice? Wasn't avoiding that choice a choice in itself? All her life, whenever she had had to make momentous choices, she had felt the pressure to choose as a weight that lay upon her, squeezing and stifling her. Sometimes she had chosen wisely, sometimes foolishly; but, whatever the outcome, the act of choosing had been in itself an agony.

The mistress's dog was old when he came to them; he would not live long, the powerful man had assured her. But he was wrong. The dog lived on in increasing decrepitude. And now it was not only his life for which she was solely responsible, it was his death too. Near the end of her life, when the anguish of having to make choices ought to be fading at last, the mistress's dog threatened her with the choices associated with his death.

It would be much, much better, Nola thought, if death would come to him there and then; if – with all the euphemistic kindness death is reputed to be capable of – it would gather him in as he slept in a patch of sun on a cold day.

Isn't that what we all want?

But it did not happen.

No one ever told Nola that her husband was having an affair. No one needed to. The powerful man's studied indifference towards a woman whom he so evidently admired, the excessive friendliness of that woman towards her, the gushing pretence that she desired a friendship to develop between them (it never did) – all these things told her unequivocally that the secretary had turned into the mistress.

Nola chose to say nothing. She allowed herself to be invited to the mistress's flat; occasionally, when she felt she had to, she invited the mistress to her home. But whereas the mistress would invite just the two of them, Nola and the powerful man, Nola always ensured that the mistress was invited to her home as part of a large dinner party. She selected the other guests carefully. They were always people the mistress had never met. They had old money. They had read old books. They had seen old paintings. They had visited old cities. They were soft-spoken. The mistress, in their company, became heartier than ever, as abrasive as a typewriter in a room in which people were writing on soft vellum with quills and ink. In the garrulous terror of the mistress, the resulting discomfort of the powerful man and the condescension of the soft-spoken people, Nola found a small but piquant revenge.

The mistress's dog woke up in the afternoon and went from room to room, looking for Nola. He found her in the entrance-hall, about to leave for the supermarket. 'I'll see you later,' she said, closing the door. He whined. Nola opened the door again and carried him to the car. 'Oh, all right,' she said.

In the car she rolled down the window a few inches. The mistress's dog pushed his face into the wind, his ears back and his tongue hanging out. He sneezed several times.

It was a day of clear light and cold blue skies. The supermarket was not far away; still, Nola found the trip arduous. Even when she kept to the speed limit, other motorists seemed to be annoyed with her for travelling too slowly. And when she backed into a parking-space, someone hooted at her – she was doing that too slowly too. A young man knocked against her as she walked into the shopping-centre and didn't even apologise. He was talking on a cellphone.

Nola pushed the trolley with one hand and held the mistress's dog in the other. He quivered against her arm. The honey nougat was on the top shelf. Nola put the dog down so that she could reach it more easily. She heard him make a little sound, almost as if he were sneezing again; but when she looked down, she saw that he had vomited on the shiny supermarket floor. The vomit was runny and yellow. 'Oh, no!' she said. 'Oh, no!' He looked up at her.

There was no one about – Nola could have crept away and slipped out of the supermarket, leaving the misdemeanour to be discovered later. But she did the right thing: she reported it and returned to the aisle, standing guard over the vomit, warning people not to tread in it. Eventually a young woman arrived to clean it up. She was sullen, resentful. 'I'm really sorry,' Nola said. 'I truly am.'

'You mustn't bring your dog in here,' the young woman said. She was big and her uniform was too tight for her. It strained against her as she bent down to clean up the mess. Her face, when she looked up, had a greasy sheen.

'You're right,' said Nola. 'You're absolutely right. I won't bring him here again. I promise.' She was as contrite as the circumstances demanded. But something also made her want to put in a plea, to soften this thick resentment. 'You know,' she said, as the young woman heaved herself to her feet, 'he's a very old dog. These things happen when you're old.' This produced no response. 'We all get old,' Nola said pointedly.

The face of the supermarket employee came perilously close to Nola's as she brushed past her. 'They must shoot me first,' she said. Nola knew when the affair was over, just as she knew when it had begun. The mistress continued to work for the powerful man, but now she was just a secretary, no longer a mistress. When the powerful man retired, so did she, declaring she could not work for anyone else. She was loyal to the end, even though the clandestine days were long gone. And no doubt she envisaged a continued relationship of sorts with the powerful man: the succour of reminiscences, of anecdotes of the years spent together.

But the powerful man retired with Nola to the coast, to Cape Town (his idea, not Nola's); and the mistress remained in Johannesburg. She wrote, she phoned every week (expensive as it was); she did whatever she could to wring a last drop of solicitude from him. But all he gave was money. 'She's hard up,' he said to Nola. 'I must do what I can to help her. After all, she worked for me for over thirty years.' When she moved from her flat to a retirement village, he financed

the move, for the cottage in the retirement village cost far more than she received from the sale of her flat.

Nola said nothing about the money, but she protested when the powerful man spoke to her (with unwonted awkwardness) of the mistress's dog – the current one, the last of the many small, yappy dogs.

'She can't take it with her to the retirement village,' he said. 'No pets allowed. Ridiculous, isn't it? You'd think they would realise that elderly people need the company of pets.'

'There must be someone else who can take it,' said Nola.

'There isn't.'

'Then she must ask the SPCA to find a home for it. Or have it put down.'

'It's an old dog. If she takes it to the SPCA, they will put it down. That will break her heart.' 'It's not my problem.'

'Please, Nola. It won't be for long. As I said, he's an old dog. He's on the way out.'

It was one of the few occasions in their marriage in which Nola had had the power, the absolute power, of decision. The choice was truly hers. If she had persisted in saying no, the mistress's dog would have remained in Johannesburg and, no doubt, would have been euthanased. It was an opportunity for revenge such as she had never had before.

But it had come too late. The powerful man had gout, an enlarged heart and a flickering memory. The mistress was no longer robust. They would never see each other again. It was too late, far too late, to triumph over them.

The mistress's dog was flown to Cape Town in a crate.

'I prefer cats,' Nola said when he arrived.

That night they sat once more in front of the TV. Nola drank dry sherry, ate honey nougat and slices of camembert on poppy-seed crackers. The mistress's dog lay on her lap.

'That was your last trip to the supermarket,' she said to him. 'Never again. No matter how much you cry.'

He bent his head towards her hand and licked it.

We are the survivors, she thought, the two of us. The powerful man had died in a Cape Town hospital after weeks on a ventilator. The mistress had died in the frail-care section of the retirement village in Johannesburg. The mistress's dog had outlived them both. And so had she.

Who would have thought that she would spend her last days with this ancient animal – with a dog that used to belong to her husband's mistress? Had she chosen him? Or had she ended up with him by default because she had not, during her life, made the wise, the adroit choices? If we are our choices, then what did it say about her that the mistress's dog was her last companion?

She sighed. He looked up at her with milky eyes. 'It's time,' she said, 'for final ablutions.'