

WALKING THE DOG

Kathy George

I come to with a whimper. I've been dreaming. Something unpleasant. The house is in near darkness and the television blaring. Somebody in a white coat talking about hospital waiting lists. The remote is at my elbow and I reach for it and turn the whole damn thing off. In the silence pale grey light diffuses a triangle of uncurtained window. I have missed the sunset again.

I need to use the toilet. I try to propel myself forward but it seems the rest of my body is not yet awake. My thighs are stiff. Unyielding. I sit for a moment in my chair. There's no immediate hurry. The grey light turns to gloom and the room fills with shadows, which I could dispel by reaching for the light, but I won't – not just yet. There's something comforting about sitting in the growing dark. In a little while I try again and this time I get myself erect and reach for my stick.

Without thinking I turn to ask Peggy if she needs anything while I am up, but halfway to doing this I remember Peggy's not here anymore. At least not in a physical sense. Her chair is empty. Has been now for four months. I am considering either moving the chair to another room or heaping it with cushions. I don't like being caught unawares.

There's a guest in the bathroom. A moth. It has large dark blue wings like a sailing dinghy. Becalmed, it sits on the cistern lid and watches the dribble of my slow pee. When I flick the light switch it bangs about as if it is blind. I think to myself it will damage its wings if it's not careful.

In the kitchen I turn on the small light above the kettle. I installed it last week. It's Chinese and cheap but I like the glow it gives out. Saves electricity, too. There's no point in flooding the place with light for one person. I can't always remember whether I've cleaned up after dinner but the sink and the draining board are clear. There's nothing to keep me here. Out of habit I look at the calendar on the wall and have to get my glasses from my top pocket to decipher what's written there. *Suzy*, it says, alongside Tuesday 6th March. *Suzy* is coming. Tomorrow. For her weekly visit.

Suzy is my daughter. She has a dog, a border collie, and after she has been to the toilet, which is her way of checking on my house cleaning, she takes me and the dog to the beach. I have a slow walk on the hard sand. *Suzy* and the dog do circuits, always returning to me, *Suzy* with some snippet of information she's remembered, the dog with the ball. He's obsessed.

I remember that I have something to show my daughter so I get the keys to the garage from the hook on the kitchen wall. I put on the outside light. It's a slow journey down the front steps. One step at a time. Twenty-five of them. And I have to remember the bricks of the last step are loose. For some reason I think of *The Rake's Progress*, although I am not much of an opera lover and it is too late to start behaving badly though the idea is amusing. A sharp smell of kelp is in the air. There must be seaweed on the beach washed up from yesterday's storm, which will make walking awkward for me unless it's removed at first light but I try not to think about this.

As soon as I see the contraption lying on my work bench I recall that it isn't quite finished. No matter. It is good enough to show *Suze*. I don't want to bring her down to the garage. She'll start on me again. "All these tools, Dad, you need to sort them out and give them away." And she'll shake her head and mutter to herself as if I'm deaf as well as stubborn. I put my invention into one of those green shopping bags with handles so that I can carry it up, and turn out the light. It bangs against

my leg as I climb the stairs and I wonder if the moth is still trying to find his way out of the bathroom.

*

Suzy's running late when I open the front door to her in the morning, and she's alone.

"He's hurt his paw," she says when I look for the dog.

"Badly?"

"Badly enough that he is limping. The vet says he needs to be kept quiet."

She rolls her eyes. "He made five hopeful trips to the boot of the car in the time it took me to get my stuff together."

She enters the house and kisses me on the cheek. A faint whiff of perfume. Always the same one. I have never been able to get used to perfume on my daughter, the fidgety slippery little girl I used to bounce on my knee. *Inky, pinky, ponky, Daddy bought a donkey.*

"We're still going to walk," she says talking over her shoulder as she heads for the bathroom.

I stand unmoving in the entrance hall, leaning on my stick. The sunlight falls in a bright slanting rectangle on the Persian rug showing up a ball of dust and fluff and a dead fly at the door's threshold. I poke at the fly with my stick and flick it to one side. Peggy would've insisted that it be cleaned up – *Now!* – before we go anywhere.

"There's a butterfly in the loo," my daughter calls out.

"A moth," I reply. "I know."

She reappears, shaking her wet hands in the air.

"Butterfly," she says. "There's a difference, you know."

"Butterflies don't come into the house."

"Well, this one has."

"He's called Fred," I say quickly.

“Fred?” She tilts her head. “He deserves something more dignified than that. Sebastian.”

“He’s not a poof,” I say, and immediately regret it. Sometimes words come out of my mouth over which I have no control.

She gives me a long cold stare. She jams her baseball hat on her head and slides on her sunglasses.

“Okay, let’s go.”

“No, wait.” I remember I have something to show her. What have I been doing standing in the hallway?

“Wait in the living room,” I tell her.

I bring it through in the green bag. I sit myself down. Falling back into my chair as I must do because I have no strength in my back.

I don’t look at Suzy. The impatient look I see too often on her face will irritate me.

“Ta-dah,” I say, as I slowly withdraw the device but I am not very good at this sort of thing.

“What is it?” She’s genuinely curious.

I wave it about. “You mean you can’t guess?”

“Dad,” she says.

“Look.”

I throw one leg up onto the footstool and grab the handles. They are like tongs, but can be extended to reach all the way down my legs to my feet. With some manipulation I undo the laces of my shoe.

I don’t know what I’m expecting but she roars with laughter.

“What,” she says, “you can’t undo your shoelaces?”

“No, I can’t. My back won’t let me.”

Fiddling with the tongs I struggle to do the laces back up, but even I can see that it’s a hopeless task. I must be slipping. I’ve made something half-arsed.

I toss the whole business to the floor. “Your mum always did my laces for me,” I say.

My daughter springs up from her chair and busies herself bending over my shoe, hiding her face from me, and I wonder when we’ll be able to talk about Peggy again.

*

It’s low tide. The sand is packed firm. And we’re late enough that the seaweed has been bulldozed into a heap and carted away. I take a moment to watch the fall of the wave and check for rips. I can no longer swim but the habit has stayed with me.

We don’t say anything but the dog’s presence is missed. Suzy ambles along next to me, adjusting her pace to suit mine, but every now and then she skips forward with impatience as if she were about to smack a cricket ball into the distance.

I ask my daughter about my grandsons, and enquire after Dave. Dave is a pilot. He does the international routes and is often away. From what I know of him he’s a good bloke. And from what Suze is saying it seems he’s home this week. I realise she’s taken time away from him to be with me. I’d like to suggest she could have skipped the visit but I can’t find the words without sounding ungrateful.

“Dad,” she says. I can tell from her tone that she’s launching into the old age home spiel. This wouldn’t have happened if the dog had been with us. She would have been too distracted. “Have you thought about moving?”

“*Moving?*” I repeat as if this were a new concept.

She grins. “Yes, moving.” She jostles me on the arm with her elbow.

I stagger a little bit and she clutches at me in concern. It’s my turn to grin.

“Don’t,” she says, “not funny.”

“Dad,” she says a minute later and I wish she wouldn’t. There’s a good swell out there, a cracking wave, sea air in our noses, and she wants to talk about

nursing homes. At my age and in my condition nursing home is a euphemism for *place to die*.

I stop my slow walk. I can't seem to remember how to move my legs forward.

"I'd much rather die in my own home," I say.

She reels around.

"Nobody's talking about dying," she says crossly.

"That's just the problem," I say, leaning on my stick. "Nobody wants to talk about dying. Can you please give me the dignity of dying on my own terms?"

"What," she says, "sprawled across the bathroom floor with your knickers around your ankles?" And she takes off, running along the beach.

Poor Peggy. .

She jogs for a little while, away from me. I stand and watch her.

After a minute, she wheels in a big curve and comes back to me. I haven't moved.

"*What?*" she says, standing in front of me, arms on her hips as if she's once again a challenging sixteen year old and not a woman with two teenage sons. And then she leans forward and kisses me on the forehead. It almost undoes me. Something in the gesture – the way she holds my face between her two hands – reminds me of her mother.

"Lunch?"

"Yes, please," I murmur. And somehow I get myself going again.

*

The cafeteria's menus are tall and flappy, and I can't see Suzy when I put my face into mine. Still, I make a show of looking through it although I know what I will have. The same thing I always have. Fish and chips.

"And I'll have a beer," I say when the waitress takes our order.

My daughter raises her eyebrows. I don't as a rule have a beer or any alcohol at lunchtime, but today I just feel what the hell. It's that thing I made. I don't like half-arsed jobs.

"Dad," Suzy says, when the waitress has gone.

"Don't start again," I say.

"I wasn't going to!"

I stare out the window. Some old guy is being wheeled past in a wheelchair, folds of chin sunk to his chest, his hands like claws in his lap.

I turn to her. "You don't seem to realise that looking after myself gives me something to do. Without something to do I may as well curl up my toes."

She fiddles with her cutlery, rearranges the daisy in the small vase.

"The house is too big for you."

"So?"

"I worry about you falling."

My beer is brought to the table. We wait while it is poured into a long frosty glass.

"Cheers," I say.

"You should get a cleaning lady."

"Anything else?"

She puts her elbows on the table, leans forward and looks me in the eye.

"Yes," she says. "Give me a sip."

*

At 6.00pm I put on a jumper and take my whisky and myself to the front patio. I sit out until I've watched the sun set and I've found a satellite – a tiny beacon of light hurtling forwards through space and time. The darkness, cold but familiar, overtakes me as I sit there, which is stupid on my part because my joints stiffen up, it's a struggle to get moving, and I can't see where I am going and could easily trip and break my neck, and then I think, well, that is the point after all, isn't it?

At least I am fully dressed.

In the bathroom the bright light startles the moth/butterfly into doing slow orbits. I watch him for a while and then I pick up my toothbrush and squeeze out some paste and bent over the basin I hear him crash against the side of the light fitting. He goes into a spiral but recovers to alight a little unsteadily on the roll of toilet paper. Right, I think. I stretch forward to open the window. The hinges are rusty and the wooden frame swollen with rain and I have to lean right across to use the full force of my arm to shift it. Before I know it my feet are slipping out from underneath me. The toothbrush plops into the basin. I clutch at the cupboard to save myself but my fingers are wet.

I'm lying on the floor when I come to, in the gap next to the toilet, and the first thing I'm conscious of is the smell. Suzy is right, I ought to get a cleaning lady.

By degrees I wriggle out and manoeuvre myself into a sitting position against the wall and although my shoulder hurts like hell and my hands are shaking, I appear to be in one piece. Sebastian is nowhere in sight. Getting myself up from the floor is a feat, but the toilet is good support, and I rinse the dried toothpaste from my mouth and find streaks of blood where I've bitten myself.

I wash my hands and my face. I should have a shower but all I want to do is lay my aching body flat on the bed. I turn off the lights as I go down the passage. My pyjamas are under the pillow but it is too much effort to even think about putting them on. On the bed I draw the rug over my knees and am about to close my eyes when I hear a sound, a light fluttering.

Sebastian flits into the room. I lose sight of him in the darkness. All I hear is a faint beating against the air and I concentrate on following the sound as he explores each gloomy corner, drifting up and down. At last he comes to settle alongside me on the lip of the lampshade.

He studies me, slowly opening and shutting his wings, until finally he closes them like hands put together in prayer, and is still.

Kathy George

Walking the Dog / 9