

### **Smirnoff, cabbage leaves and fruit.**

'Smirnoff, where are you? Come back this minute' hissed Jane from the half open back door, early one grey, damp Sunday morning.

Blast the dog, he'd whined to go out for a wee and it was still only 6.00am. Why wasn't he coming back up the garden, as he usually did, wondered Jane.

And why on earth did we call him Smirnoff Jane thought, not for the first time. She didn't even like vodka. The neighbours must think she's mad. Jane was very glad that she and Phillip lived in a Welsh village, miles away from the town where she taught. Her pupils at the secondary school already thought she was just a little scatty, her long greying hair pinned precariously into a bun, which gradually unfurled as the school day unfolded, a very old pair of NHS spectacles perched on the end of her nose. A kindly soul Jane did everything for her charges; some staff said she did too much. Indeed, her newly promoted, much younger and prettier course leader had suggested this, rather high handedly, at the last team meeting. Jane had gone straight to the headmaster to complain. It wouldn't do to tell Phil, her husband of 35 years of course, he was far too busy being a QC in London and besides, he might suggest legal proceedings of one sort or another.

Jane shivered and called the liver spotted spaniel again. No sign of him. Donning a coat over her brushed cotton, lilac coloured nightie, Jane pulled on a pair of green wellies and went into the garden.

'Where are you, you naughty boy? What on earth are you doing there?'

Smirnoff was laid, shivering and bedraggled by the compost heap. He didn't look at all well. I wonder if he's been foraging amongst the cabbage leaves and rotting fruit, again? Barbara hurried back to the house to get Smirnoffs blanket. She gently carried the beloved family pet, heavy and damp with cold and smelling of something resembling sick, into the kitchen. A biologist by trade and, with previous experience of greedy dogs in times past, Jane knew enough about doggie behaviour to realise Smirnoff had eaten something that really didn't agree with him. She coaxed the dog into his basket by the Aga and then went upstairs to change. Phil was staying at his London flat to catch up on work, prior to the Easter break. Back downstairs Smirnoff was looking even more forlorn and was definitely poorly. Barbara reached for the phone and rang the local vet.

A home visit. This isn't going to be cheap, thought Jane. The last 'sick dog' episode had cost a fortune. An out of hours home call cost upwards of £250-£300, without any X-rays, treatment or medication. Investigative in-house blood testing a further £100. Any samples taken and sent away for analysis shot the cost up to £2,500. Eye watering if one didn't have pet insurance.

The vet duly arrived, checked Smirnoff over and went ahead to lift the dogs uncomplaining frame into his smart, expensive looking black Range Rover. Smirnoff needed to have a cannula and drip inserted, bloods taken and careful monitoring. The next 24 hours were crucial. Jane collapsed in a heap. Tears came, she felt bereft. Smirnoff was more than her pet. He was her friend, confidante, companion. Phil was away so often.

She'd better ring and let him know. She dialled his number. A sleepy voice answered. It wasn't Phil and it definitely wasn't a voice she recognised either. Jane slammed the phone down. Not again, she thought angrily. How could he? His trashy secretary or was it the new office manager this time, helping David with his 'overtime', she thundered aloud.

There's nothing like the unconditional love of a pet. They show you affection, give you a sense of purpose and greet you every day. From bringing them home and naming them, to making memories, watching them grow older with you. The friendship you share is immeasurable. Smirnoff listened when Jane had been exasperated by her tutees, her own children Huw and Scarlett, but mainly when she had been betrayed by her errant husband. But now Smirnoff was being safely transported 25 miles away to The Park veterinary surgery. Jane swore quietly under her breath, then more loudly. Very strong language, including the unprintable F word passed her lips. If her colleagues at work could have heard her, they would have been taken aback by the forcefulness of her ire. She wanted to throttle Phil with her bare hands.

Jane eventually decided to leave Phil a message on his answer machine.

'I'm going to leave your clothes in a bin bag at the bottom of the garden, next to the compost heap where I found Smirnoff this morning. He's at the vets, again. I shall instruct the solicitor to start divorce proceedings. I intend to discuss this with Scarlett and Huw when I have calmed down. And you can pay the vet bill'.

With no reply to her message forthcoming Jane became even angrier. She sat down with a pot of tea and a bowl of cornflakes for breakfast, not really up to anything more. She decided to busy herself with some late spring cleaning. After she had gathered Phil's clothes and thrown them into several dustbin bags, she busied herself tidying kitchen drawers and cupboards. Out went old postcards, birthday and anniversary cards, broken pegs, pens with no ink and wonky paper clips, along with elastic bands, dingy looking dishcloths and worn-out t. towels. Underneath the detritus were a number of plastic charity bags, you know the type - ones an anonymous person shoves through your letter box, hoping you'll fill it with unwanted stuff. Air Ambulance, Children's Hospice, Red Cross, Medicine Sans Frontiere, that sort of thing. Wedged underneath all of these was a bag for a charity called A Veterans Best Friend. Her attention drawn by a picture of a chocolate brown Labrador with sorrowful eyes looking back at her, Jane dropped herself into the nearest chair to read the charity blurb.

'Veterans with dogs – we are able to draw out even the most isolated people. Engaging with a dog helps veterans, or 'vets' as they like to be called, to overcome emotional numbness (a symptom of PTSD)....'

Memories of France where the family had a holiday home came flooding into Jane's mind. Often it was just her and the children there. Phil not so often. The children were always keen to visit the Normandy beaches to see for themselves the relics of a war won almost 80 years ago. How many more 'vets' from Iraq, Afghanistan, Ireland, the Falkland Islands were there who suffered from PTSD Jane wondered. Her eyes filled with more tears.

Exhausted by the uneven work/life balance she was subject to, the relentless demands of children, parents, colleagues, she admitted in saner moments, what Jane was most tired of were Phil's antics.

Suddenly, Jane had a flash of inspiration. She would gather all Phil's clothes and donate the lot to the Veterans Best Friend charity, rather than leave them for him to collect. Everything from suits, shirts, shoes and socks. Too good to be wasted on Phil. He could buy new. She'd give in her notice at work, travel down to France, having done the trip so many times. The house in Wales could go up for sale and, once all the legal stuff had been sorted, she could either come back to GB and find a cottage by the sea or maybe, just stay in France. But best of all, she was going to write a book about errant and duplicitous men! God, was she bloody angry. All she had to do now was keep her fingers crossed that Smirnoff would pull through. Plan devised; Jane was decisive for the first time in 35 years.

Due legal processes gone through, passport and baggage in hand Jane departed from Dover to Calais one sunny morning with a spring in her step. She was mortgage and man free!!

She enjoyed her self imposed exile in France for two years. Under the clear blue skies of the French countryside she wrote her book, fortified by a substantial supply of French Merlot and the occasional glass of champagne. The book published, it became relatively popular, particularly with jilted wives and partners. The majority of colleagues from school lost touch with her. Her children flourished. Huw followed his father into law, practicing in both France and GB. Scarlett followed her mother into teaching. As for Smirnoff, he recovered from his encounter with the rotting compost and stayed with Jane, enjoying long walks along uncrowded Normandy beaches in the autumn and winter months, having curbed his enthusiasm for rotting cabbage leaves and fruit. Phillip continued working in London, having paid the vet bill, without comment. Any negotiation between the couple was through their respective solicitors.

Nearly three years later a retired ex pat teacher saw a late middle-aged woman walking down the Avenue Victor Hugo in Paris, with an elderly spaniel in tow. She squinted. Her eyes must be deceiving her. Surely it was Jane from her old High School? Her hair was just the same, she was still wearing her usual skirt, blouse and cardigan from Seasalt and the same type of shoes from Pavers. It must be her!

She hadn't changed a bit, except her grey hair was now in a bob, her uncontrollable bun gone!  
And who was this with her? Surely it wasn't Phillip the errant husband who Jane swore she  
would never take back?

Perhaps only Smirnoff knew the answers and, true to form, he was keeping his counsel as a  
dutiful and loyal pet should.

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