

Gilberto

Everything around that dining table was as normal as clouds contorting in the sky. Dad was pacing up and down, looking at his phone, putting it in and taking it out of his trouser pocket, looking at it again like some poorly choreographed extra. Mum sat at the far end of the table as the steam dissipated from her serve of mashed potato. She was poking at it with her fork, and sort of eating it in that semi-polite way of beginning while not wanting to begin before we had all sat down. Belinda was testing to see if she could cut the meat holding the fork in her right hand and knife in her left, and the proof she couldn't was the small scattering of potato on the table beside her drinking glass.

I wasn't there yet but would be soon, and when I arrived oh boy would their demeanours shift. Just wait.

'Sorry about this being late,' I said, on my first step past the dining-room door. 'I didn't mean it at all. And also the making you wait thing. Not what I wanted to happen, but there is a reason.'

'Bloody, bloody,' said Belinda. 'Here we go again.'

'Is that language completely necessary?' rehearsed Dad.

‘Necessity component 94.3 per cent,’ said Belinda. ‘So no. Not completely.’

‘Sit down, Blake,’ said Mum. ‘Let’s at least eat while we endure your poor excuse.’

Dad and I took our places, and Dad immediately began to eat his potato with a teaspoon.

‘Anyway,’ I said, ‘as I was walking home from school, I saw a man walking two magnificent dogs of great stature, the breed of which I happened to recognise, due to my patronage last weekend of the *Dogs of the World* TV special, as Kazakhstani wolfhounds.’

‘Shaggy dog story,’ said Belinda, categorically.

‘*Short-haired* Kazakhstani wolfhounds,’ I corrected. ‘I engaged this man in conversation by asking rhetorically, “Are those Kazakhstani wolfhounds?” and he seemed very pleased by this recognition. No knowledge is bad knowledge, right Dad?’

‘Hrrrmpphh,’ assented Dad, through his ongoing mouthful.

‘The man told me his sad story, that he and his brother had each taken one puppy, but that his brother had died of some rare virus, and so he walked the two dogs with a heavy heart. He actually used the phrase “heavy heart”. I asked if the dogs were friendly, and began to scratch one of them behind its ears. This particular dog took an immediate liking to me.’

‘Dr Do-nothing.’ Belinda couldn’t not say things, in case that wasn’t obvious enough.

‘Thanks. So what did you do today?’

‘Plenty,’ she lied.

‘So the man said, “He seems so fond of you. His name is Gilberto. I renamed him after my late brother.” I told him how lovely that was, and the man said to me, “You know, two dogs is really too much for me, and it’s so sad every day. Would you like Gilberto? But no, you probably already have a dog.”’

My family were perhaps more attentive at this moment than at any time in history. I swept my hand grandly around its full arc.

‘You didn’t,’ said Mum.

‘I did. I said to him, “That’s so beautiful.”’

‘No,’ said Belinda.

‘And so ... we’ve got a dog. Who wants to help me bathe him after dinner?’

‘You have to give it back,’ said Mum. ‘We’re not dog people.’

‘Just have a look at him, Mum,’ I pleaded. ‘I guarantee you’ll fall in love.’

‘I’ve never fallen in love before,’ said Mum, pointedly not looking at Dad, ‘so I think that’s unlikely. You’ll have to take it back.’

‘I actually can’t,’ I said. ‘I have no idea where the guy lives or his name or anything. But just have a look at him.’

‘Don’t worry, Mum. He’s only having us on,’ said Belinda.

‘I’ll help you bathe him,’ said Dad, unexpectedly.

At that moment Gilberto let out a massive yowl from where I’d tied him up out the front. I don’t recall ever having seen Dad look so happy. Belinda just stared at me like she couldn’t believe I’d told the truth. I always tell the truth, so what was with that?

‘We had a Great Dane when I was a teenager,’ Dad said. ‘The old type, before all the wolf was bred out of them.’

‘No,’ said Mum.

‘It would take over the entire house,’ said Belinda. ‘Are you going to keep it in your room?’

‘I don’t mind,’ I said. ‘He’ll probably decide himself where he goes. You can walk him sometimes if you want. If he likes you, that is.’

‘He’s going to the pound,’ said Mum. ‘You can put up notices around the area so the owner can find him again.’

‘I’m the owner,’ I said. ‘And I don’t need to find him.’

‘Look,’ Dad said in the conciliatory voice he uses when he knows he’s about to say completely the wrong thing, ‘why don’t we give the dog a try for a couple of weeks? If it doesn’t work for all of us, we can work out what to do with him after that.’

‘That seems reasonable,’ I said quickly. They’d never be able to get rid of him once they’d met him.

‘No,’ said Mum again. ‘There will be no dog.’

‘I’m with Mum,’ said Belinda. ‘Dogs smell houses out. It will be revolting and after a few weeks we won’t even notice how squalid everything has become. We’ll lose all our friends and all their replacements will be weirdos we meet in the park who’ve also lost all their friends because of the dog-stink thing.’

‘So negative,’ I said.

Gilberto yowled again, almost impossibly loudly, though the increased volume was immediately explained when he came running into the dining room, trailing his chewed-through rope. Dad leapt to his feet, Mum

instinctively covered her food with a piece of paper towel, and Belinda did that folding-up thing that people do to reduce surface area available for licking or sniffing at. As always, this motion had the opposite effect to that intended, and Gilberto went straight up to Belinda, his brontosauric tail wagging with potential destruction.

‘Help!’ said Belinda.

‘Gilberto, here boy! Come here!’ I shouted.

Dad came around the table, and we wrestled the dog away from Belinda, but not before a chair or two had been smashed to the ground by his mighty tail translating potential into kinetic energy.

‘See. I told you he was lovely,’ I said.

Mum returned to her monosyllabic ‘No.’

‘You know what,’ said Dad. ‘Yes.’

Mum spun around and stared at him. Her face, which I guess had contained the practised negativity of a high-school debater, became virtually expressionless, the thinnest example of a smile lifting the corner of her mouth by a degree or two.

‘You’re saying ‘Yes?’’ she said, a question without inflection.

‘I think I am. No. I *am*,’ said Dad, remembering to meet her eyes.

Gilberto had stopped his brutal running around and with a series of limb-folds lay down on a tiled section of the dining room in front of what had been a fireplace.

‘Fine,’ said Mum. ‘You know what this means?’

‘Spell it out,’ said Dad.

‘Crapping bloody crap,’ said Belinda, a phrase that doesn’t bear thinking about. ‘Blake, please.’

I'd left the table and was sitting beside Gilberto, rubbing the hard crest of his skull between the ears.

'I'll write it down,' said Mum, 'in the letter.'

'I'll be sure to write back, in time,' said Dad.

'Blake,' repeated Belinda.

'It's just about the dog for me,' I said lamely, continuing to stroke Gilberto. 'I can't help the rest.'

'Okay,' said Belinda, 'but we all know that's not true. You could have foreseen this. You probably did.'

'Unfair,' I said, because who could possibly foresee what action would have which result in human relations?

Mum and Dad had separately left the room through different doors, and Belinda also stood to leave.

'See you round, Blake,' said my sister.

'Bye,' I said. The whole thing was too bizarre. All this resulting from a dog? It made no sense. I sat there with Gilberto and waited for it all to blow over, for my parents to re-enter with a jointly delivered Yes or the more likely No, for Belinda to retell the story to her friends within my hearing and with me as the fool. I waited for the wonderful Gilberto to be taken from me and for everyone to deliver to me endless lessons about my endless foolishness.

'Anyway, Gilberto,' I said out loud. 'If it was up to me, you and I would keep the house.'

If I had ever imagined that any wish I made might be fulfilled, it would not have been that just one month later, Gilberto and I *had* kept the house. Instead, it would have been some wishy-washy wish about us all being happy, about which Belinda would have made endless sarcastic

remarks. But it had been my first-voiced desire which came to pass.

Mum had moved out the day I brought Gilberto home, saying only, 'It's not you. It's your father.'

Belinda had gone with her, saying only that she would stay with Mum to make sure she was all right.

Or, more exactly, 'Whatever Mum says, or Dad, or the Pied Bloody Piper, this is all your fault, Blake. Our parents would have lasted forever but for you and Gilberto, your little stupid pony.'

In fact, Dad lasted no time at all without Mum. He missed her immensely, and for all his sense that he was a dog person who had been deprived of dogs for two decades, he completely folded, or as completely as he could. I guess Belinda was right and my dog-lovingness had been a catalyst for their separation. I had somehow convinced Dad that it was too late for Gilberto to be sent anywhere: there was nowhere to send him back to, and the only alternative was to send him to a likely death. I asked Dad to imagine poor, hyper-friendly Gilberto being locked in too small a cage at the pound and eventually put down. My father would have done almost anything to make it up with Mum, anything but cause Gilberto harm, but she refused to have him back. Within three days of Gilberto's arrival, presumably as some kind of hopeful penance, Dad had gone to live in a dog-free apartment just around the corner from Mum.

This was, I told him, a very bad idea. True penance has no other motives, and I tried to explain to Dad that hopeful penance was bound to be hopeless.

Meantime, I did my best to walk and feed and wash Gilberto, and I tried to pick up and dispose of all the dog poo – Belinda even shifted her nickname for me from Dr Do-nothing to Dr Doodoo, admittedly not much of an improvement, but at least an acknowledgement of my effortfulness. I demonstrated to Mum, Dad and Belinda how close Gilberto and I were, and Gilberto definitely became my dog. I had found a chain in the shed he couldn't chew through, and he could no longer come into the house without my invitation – though this was frequently proffered and accepted.

Mum and Dad came to visit me most days. Dad brought food and waited for me to come to my senses, which I didn't. Mum brought food and an attitude of understanding and forbearance, but wouldn't enter the house if Gilberto was inside. Belinda brought questions such as, 'Why are you such an idiot, Blake?' and 'You do know that you've destroyed my life and the lives of all those around you?'

Belinda had been right about the house becoming a dog house, and it probably did stink. But none of my friends minded, because of the boy thing, so I kept them all. I also met many more people, fascinated by this massive canine towing a teenager around the neighbourhood every morning and afternoon.

One evening there was a thumping on the door and as my family would not have bothered to knock and my friends would have tapped in odd or distinctive ways, I assumed it was neither. I opened the door: when you have a dog the size of mine, you forget caution. An older man I

had never seen before stood there. He looked a bit knocked about, as though he'd had bruises but didn't any longer.

'Gilberto,' the man said.

'My dog,' I said. 'Is something wrong?'

Gilberto was clattering his chain in an extremely lively way, even for him. The man stuck out his hand.

'Blake,' I said, shaking it.

He nodded, but didn't say his own name. Gilberto had started on the yowling again.

'Just hang on a second,' I said. 'I need to check on my dog.'

'Your dog,' he echoed.

'Gilberto,' I said, turning and running to the backyard.

Gilberto was tugging the chain towards the house with all his might.

'What's up, boy?' I said, unhooking him and completely missing as I went to grab his collar. Gilberto ran for the house. I chased him, calling 'Stop! Stop!' although this had no effect at all. He ran straight for the man who, instead of flinching, dropped to one knee right there on my front step. The dog almost sent him flying, but the man reached out and hugged him like a long-lost relative.

'Gilberto?' I said.

'Yes,' said the man. 'Thank you. I have returned.'

I almost lost the power of speech: 'You? Dead? Not?'

'Not,' said Gilberto the man. 'But I will kill my brother. Though not literally.'

'Why?'

'My brother is a liar, a thief, a swindler,' said Gilberto. 'It's a pity I love him.'

‘What?’ I asked, still stuck on one word at a time.

‘Families are complicated.’

I couldn’t disagree with him.

I’d like to report that over the next week, my family moved back in, repaired the furniture, painted the walls, sanded the floor, filled in the holes in the backyard and all went back to the way it had been. Instead, we instituted a set of trials and tests, with regular reviews and conferences, all scheduled for different evenings in the dining room.

As Belinda told me, ‘You just had to do that, didn’t you?’