

COVER PAGE

Amber the Dog

By

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Amber the dog beguiled me more than any woman ever had. Except Trudy. With Trudy I was intrepid, inspired to move into the world. A last throw of the dice, I thought.

The year I met Trudy was a year of unease. My house, the car, my life, grew stale. If I'd been struck blind, I could have negotiated every inch of my home with absolute confidence, placing my hands on anything you named, almost as soon as it was named. Previously this was a comfort, now the sameness, lack of surprise, vexed me.

I plodded through each day, waiting for this to make sense. Then I found Trudy. She was the catalyst, but I was ready. I ventured forward, anxious to keep up with her. I strayed from my old ways. To my surprise I found joy in doing so.

Don't imagine I never moved out in the world before, of course I did. I regularly travelled into the city. I admit, most of the time, most days I worked from my home office. As an architect, I made the usual forays out to secure new assignments. I attended meetings, as required. Each week I made time for browsing in bookshops, my one luxury. I usually frequented Stanley's on the High Street. I call it Stanley's although old Dan Stanley has long since departed this world. These days two young men, both far too hearty and loud for my liking, own the shop.

The day was a Wednesday, I recall. I'd just delivered a set of plans to a client. I prefer to visit Stanley's when there only a few customers among the shelves; that day I could not resist the temptation. There was a particular book I hoped they might stock. Simon Winchester's latest book did not interest me, however, during a radio interview, *The Surgeon of Crowthorne*, was mentioned.' I was convinced I should read it.

The old-fashioned bell clanged, as I stepped through the doorway. One of the fervent young men came forward. I smiled briefly and moved past him to peruse the shelves. In bookshops, I prefer not to talk. I like to stroll up and down the rows immersing myself in the atmosphere. Not for me, modern bookshops, all wide aisles, bright posters and rock idol biographies. No serenity, or nooks and crannies filled with surprises.

I was certainly surprised that day. Stanley's clients were far more numerous than I expected. If I'd seen them through the window I might well have walked on by. As I rounded a corner from 'Cooking' to 'Biography,' I saw a woman sitting on one of the small stools Stanley's provide as seats, or for reaching higher shelves. I intended to politely ignore her but she looked up and said, "Hi."

This was a shock. My instinct was to give a brief response and continue. That day was odd. Or I was odd. I responded in a way so out of character. On her left cheek I saw, like some mammoth beauty spot, a splodge, no other word for it, of something looking remarkably like chocolate. Without thinking, I swear, I said, "There's a mark on your cheek. Probably choc..." Before I could go further she handed me a tissue, saying coquettishly, "Please wipe it off, will you?" I obeyed her and handed the tissue back.

She laughed, "Thanks, I mean, you could see it better than me. I know what happened. This morning I had this terrible urge for a chocolate brownie with my cappuccino. Just had to have one, I guess a bit landed on my face."

Why did she tell me that? She made me react in a way that was most unusual for me. "I'm partial to brownies too," I told her. "Sometimes I buy one and divide it, save a piece for the next day."

"Oh?" Her eyes grew large. "I'd never do that. Delayed satisfaction, isn't it?"

“Really?” I said. We were on shaky ground. “Anyway, I must...” I started to move.

“Hey,” she said, “You wiped my face, at least tell me your name?”

I paused, looked back. What should I say? Too rude to ignore her. I retraced my steps, and held out my hand. “I’m Gregory.”

“Nice to meet you Greg, I’m Trudy.”

Afterwards, I realised how much that meeting told me about Trudy. Her openness, lack of caution. She was the opposite of me. I sidle past life, hoping I am not noticed; she slapped life on the back, forcing it to acknowledge her presence. They say opposites attract. I certainly felt an inexorable force drawing me towards her. A voice of caution whispered *pull back*. I’m sure Trudy never had those compunctions. She blew into my life like a balmy, summer wind, betraying no desire to change direction. She whirled around, warming my life, eddying me off balance. Changing everything. So, boldly stepping forward was easy, desirable even.

Before I met Trudy, I left home each day knowing exactly how long I’d be gone. Three hours, almost to the minute. At a little past six o’clock each evening I expected to be back, and I was. As I said before, my days were predictable, settled. Home was my sanctuary. These days I turned the key, entered the hall and was hemmed in, claustrophobic. I no longer sighed with relief and sank into an armchair. I felt compelled to play music, to stride about, open cupboards, re-arrange furniture, clatter kitchen utensils. Anything.

“You should get a dog,” Trudy said. “Or a cat, to keep you company, Greg.”

This never occurred to me. Trudy had a dog, a small white Scottish Terrier, called Amber, with a large grin on its face, although I only noticed this when Trudy pointed it

out. I am not familiar with dogs. I often cross the street if I see one ahead. My parents, both dead, never owned pets of any sort. They said I was enough, whatever that means. Animals were outside my realm. Trudy said, very kindly I admit, that a lot was outside my realm.

“Greg, do you realise how reclusive you are? A proper old Howard Hughes. Has no one ever told you to get a life?”

I said if they had I ignored them. I had work, books, music, a garden. My life was full.

“Oh really,” she said. ‘You won’t be needing me then?’ She curled her lips and I had no option but to kiss her.

Having Trudy in my life changed everything; not only was the house too quiet, and old, into its fifties like me. I suppose the furniture was well past its use by date. My car, too, was old, rattled, had specks of rust.

“Ooh, you do like the old stuff,” Trudy said.

“No, not at all. Why change without a valid reason, that’s my philosophy.”

‘Right, if it ain’t broke don’t mend it?’ She looked at me with a humorous tilt of her head. Something like that, I thought, glancing at faded curtains and flaking wallpaper. I wondered if she found my clothes out-dated, a few items were my father’s, I admit.

Trudy was a doctor’s receptionist. She told me how much she enjoyed her daily contact with clients, how this made her want to go further. She intended enrolling in a counselling course, eventually changing to that line of work. The day after she told me the idea buzzed in my head for hours. She was so vital, in her forties and yet considering a new career, just like that. A similar move never occurred to me. I became an architect so that’s what I stayed. I had no particular aspirations. I was content working from home,

as I had for twenty years. I took things as they came, and they come inevitably—one day pretty much like the last. Trudy didn't say, 'You are so staid.' I said it to myself, and was shocked at the concept. If anyone asked if I was happy I would have said 'yes.' Now I wondered. Trudy made me question. Made me yearn.

We spent time together doing what I imagine are the usual couple things. We saw movies, went to restaurants, many I never knew existed. Visited art galleries and museums. I was used to art galleries; with Trudy they were surprising, stimulating experiences.

After three months together, Trudy said, “What next? Where do we go from here, Greg?”

I let go of her hand, turned to face her. We were listening to Pavarotti; side-by-side on a velvet sofa, not high on comfort but I was used to it.

“What do you mean? Where do you want to go?” I leaned towards her.

She lifted her glass of white wine. “Drink up, I'll pour another.”

“My idea is... we go away together? I can take a few days off. How's that grab you?”

“A holiday with you sounds like a good idea.”

“You look shell-shocked, Greg. Your eyes went wide. You should see yourself! Hey, we're a good team, right? We fancy each other, yeah? It'll be fun.” She snuggled closer.

Yes, I was sweet on her, if that's the expression. I did fancy her. I rolled the phrase round in my mind. We settled on going south; we'd rent a cottage overlooking the ocean, rather than stay in a hotel. Trudy said we'd have more freedom.

“What about Amber?” Trudy worried about her dog if we were out too late.

“No problem. My neighbour will have her. Anyway, there's places that take dogs.”

‘Would you prefer those?’ I wanted Trudy to be happy on this holiday.

‘Hey, great. Sure you’re okay with that?’ She smiled widely. I was pleased I’d offered. It was agreed; Trudy, Amber and I would go south.

They say the only thing a man thinks about is sex. This may be true when a man is twenty or thirty. Although, at that age, because girls, women, I should say, were so rarely part of my life, I can’t say I was too bothered. I can’t compare myself to other men. I’ve never indulged in man-to-man talk. I read articles and novels, but do they represent real life? This holiday, for me, wasn’t about sex with Trudy. I focussed on being with her, living together for a short while. Naturally, I hoped we’d sleep together.

Don’t misunderstand me, by the time I met Trudy I was no virgin. I’d never had what people call a relationship. In my twenties girls were attracted to me. They did the running and sex was easy. I probably stayed the night with some of them I don’t recall bringing anyone home. After a few occasions with the same person I’d draw back, as if stung. That’s how I felt. My urge was to back off, re-settle in my routine. As I grew older, not much altered. I met women on trips to the city or office parties. They did the enticing and I was lured. No complaints. After a short while the old familiar feelings asserted themselves. Time to go Gregory, back to your own life.

The women were nice. I appreciated their attention, yet anything more involved was risky, an upheaval. Occasionally the women were angry. One said, ‘‘What *is* your problem.’’ I didn’t think I had one. If I was content, why change? I hadn’t chased them so why did they complain? Over the years it became easier to ignore the come-ons.

Until the day of the chocolate splodge on Trudy’s face I’d had a carefree run for, oh, ten years or more. I did ask myself why I was different with her? She came to my home.

Frequently. We became an item; I think that's the phrase. She gave me space, was not into overt sexual enticement.

Now I'd said yes to a holiday. I'd waded into the ocean much further than before. With other females I paddled up to my ankles. With Trudy, the water was lapping my knees. I was willingly going deeper. Perhaps as far as submerging. I was not afraid, not then.

The changes in my life were extreme, yet she was such a delight of a woman, full of verve, laughter and summer sun. I licked my lips just thinking of her, just as she probably did with her chocolate brownie the day we met. These days when we bought chocolate brownies I ate half of mine straight away. Once, Trudy dared me and I consumed an entire brownie in one go.

As I packed for our holiday frissons of excitement ran through me, yet underneath I was anxious. Not sure whether to pack my pyjamas or dressing gown; were they modern night attire? I pushed them to the bottom of the bag. Was my underwear acceptable, new enough? Should I take bathers? I hadn't swum for years. In the end, I said yes to everything and my bag bulged.

Our days by the ocean were pure, what shall I say...? Clichés abound when you read about romantic interludes. I'm not the sort to indulge in those. The experience of waking with the smell of someone you love filling your senses was new to me. To be wrapped in a wonderful dream, then roused with a kiss to discover you were living the dream. I became intoxicated, could not leave Trudy's side. I worried she might tire of such devotion.

Trudy was less talkative than I'd ever known her. She was quiet, soft, melting in the drooling joy of it all. She spent the days with a smile hovering on her lips, her face aglow, as if her pheromones danced in wonder. I was enchanted by our sexual chemistry. If I'd had sex with other women, what was this? In the past, I was content to be seduced yet afterwards keen to return to being me. If I repeated an encounter I knew I'd soon retreat. Retreat from Trudy was unthinkable.

They say there's no fool like an old fool. I was the fool—foolishly, deliriously in love. I'd waited all my life for this delicious limbo. I imagined we'd be together forever. That's how far gone I was.

“This doesn't have to end, Greg,”

We lay spooned on the couch, soothed by the tranquil blue and green tones of the chalet. Amber lounged at our feet, panting a little in the warmth. Spicy aromas from Trudy's apple tarts escaped from the kitchen. Trudy herself was a feast for my arms. The ocean lapped softly beyond the glass doors, orange bougainvillea rustled against the walls.

“How?” I nuzzled her neck breathing in musk shower gel.

“We can stay together, not here, of course. Oh Greg, you know what I'm saying.”

“Not exactly,” I said, and I didn't. I was an innocent fool. Not versed in how easily one slips from security into the perilous.

“I'll move in with you. Or you with me. Whichever is easiest, I suppose.” She giggled.

I gazed at her pixie face, tilted nose, chestnut hair streaked with blond. Her elation was clear. I turned, wriggled my hands through her hair, gently pulled her to me. My heart

reverberated from the shock of her words. Surely she could hear. I kissed her many times. Didn't speak. She knew.

"What's happened, what's wrong," tears streamed across her cheeks. "Greg, tell me? We'd be happy. Isn't it what we both want?"

It was, and it wasn't. Of course it was. But I'd ventured out too far. If I did not step back, I'd be engulfed. I held her...and held her. I said nothing. I didn't know how to tell her of my fears. No words were right. Eventually afternoon became evening. The sound of the ocean became louder.

"We could stay as we were Trudy? Nothing needs to change. Why alter things, we were happy, weren't we?"

Now she was silent.

That night we lay in the same bed—no longer together. My soul hungered for Trudy. Life is so perverse. I was with the woman I wanted, who wanted me.

In the morning she was gone. I don't know how. My car was outside. Her bags were gone. I assume she walked into the nearby town. I had not sensed her leave my side. Or felt her place a note on my pillow.

Greg dear,

I don't understand you at all. I was so sure we were good together. This holiday was our beginning. You've shut me out. What happened? It makes no sense but I don't want you to be lonely again. I've left Amber with you. She knows you well enough. Be happy dear Greg.

On the foot of the bed, gazing at me, was Amber, the dog. I leaned forward to stroke her silky head.

“I love Trudy,” I told her. “I do, and I’m a coward. I can’t do what she wants. Forgive me Amber?” I’m sure she did.

I never saw Trudy again. I hope she did not miss Amber as much as I missed her.

Amber and I have grown close. She lolls at my feet while I work and sleeps on my bed at night. I’ve become a fitter man as I accede to her wishes for walks, both morning and evening. We listen to music together. Television is beyond her. I don’t mind, I’m no television addict. I suppose I am content. I used to think I was happy—that was before I met Trudy.

Amber the dog beguiles me. I never had a dog before. In her I see something of Trudy. On my way home each afternoon, I buy a chocolate brownie and divide it into four. Two portions for Amber, two for me. She eagerly munches away, her eyes flicking up at me now and again. Small pieces of chocolate somehow always cling to the fur near her mouth. I gently wipe them away.