

'The Dog'

When he was just a puppy, it had seemed to the dog that he had been able to be himself. He would roll, bark and scamper, and chase after balls. All the other dogs would sit around and talk. They'd watch him and say: "What a lovely little puppy. Look at him playing. He hasn't a care in the world." The puppy loved the attention. His heart raced, his tail wagged and his nose sniffed the air that was full of interesting things. But puppies don't stay puppies for long, and cuteness soon passes. Before he knew it, and without realising, it seemed he was being trained. He did his business and it smelt OK; it smelt like his. But it seemed it was in the wrong place. There were harsh words, and a rough hand at the back of his neck, rubbing his nose into it: "Bad dog, bad dog!" He wasn't sure where he should go, but he soon learnt where he shouldn't. And he learnt that the smell of his "bad dog" was a smell to be ashamed of. As time went on, it gradually became clear that he wasn't allowed upstairs or on sofas. He wasn't allowed to lick faces or feet. He wasn't allowed to eat anything not in his bowl. He mustn't drink from the toilet. And he must not jump the fence into next-door's garden, even though he was an excellent jumper. It was hard for him, as these things were things he wanted to do; all of them.

What he loved most was going for walks. But he was always on a lead. His nose would pick up all sorts of smells and he would run ahead, but then the

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lead would pull and his collar would tighten and choke him. Even though this hurt, he would pull against the lead and strain towards the interesting smell. Then he would catch a scent under his feet and stop behind to investigate, but the lead would tighten again and he would get dragged forward as the walk continued. Every walk was like this, slow and laboured, and the smells that he smelt always seemed to be bad ones. He noticed that his tail didn't do much wagging any more, and generally just hung between his legs. There must have been some kind words from his Trainer, but all the actions and words that stuck in his memory were scoldings and corrections.

Then came the day when his new Master came to pick him up. "He's pretty much house-trained," he heard his Trainer say. And he saw his new Master get out a handful of banknotes, paying for what must have been ownership of him. Such things are not easily understood by a dog. But it did seem a lot. The new Master bent down, hugged the dog and then lifted him high off the ground and held him. The dog was delighted by the sudden attention and felt all puppyish again. This was wonderful. Things were looking better already. He quite forgot himself and licked the Master's face. He suddenly felt guilty; he knew that a dog shouldn't do such a thing. The Master didn't seem to mind, but the dog still felt bad about it. Maybe he had got away with it this time. But he mustn't let it happen again. He must try to be a good dog now.

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Well, he went home with the new Master and didn't live with the Trainer any more. Life was much better. The new Master was kind and the dog liked being in the same room as him. Sometimes the Master would lean over to stroke the dog. The Master's hand felt gentle on his back. But the dog remembered the Trainer's hand on his neck when he'd had his nose rubbed in his own "bad dog", and the dog thought to himself: "I must be good. It's even more important that I don't make mistakes here."

When they went out together for walks, the dog would still run ahead or hang back but then be aware of his collar. He would feel bad and try to correct himself, always worrying that he would let the new Master down.

One day he thought he heard the Master calling him from the living room, so he bounded to the room to see what the Master wanted. His Master was smiling from the sofa and slapped on the cushion next to him. The Master looked so welcoming. It looked inviting on the sofa next to him, but the dog knew that he wasn't allowed on sofas, so he sat on the floor next to the sofa, on his own.

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Although he knew he was living in a better home now, he found himself withdrawing to his basket more often. He would sit and stare at his lifeless tail and wonder: "Why am I not happy any more, like I was when I was a puppy? If only I could get my tail to wag again." He would concentrate on his tail, trying to make it wag, but it wouldn't. He would nudge it with his nose. It seemed like it was dead. "There's something very wrong with me," he said.

Now when he went for walks with his Master, the dog tried hard to resist the smells that had distracted him before, and he tried to stay at the Master's heel. He would see other dogs with their masters and saw them straining painfully against their leads, and thought how undisciplined they were. He shook his head: how much they still had to learn. At other times he would see a dog chasing after a ball or a stick in the distance. He would bark loudly to warn them: "Behave, behave, stop that. It's really not the right behaviour for a grown dog. You're not a puppy now, you know!" He despaired of the other dogs. He felt that he himself might make quite a good sheepdog for these less disciplined mutts, as he felt he now had quite a good grasp of what it was to be a good dog.

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The dog was starting to feel a greater stability in his doggy existence. He was more disciplined on walks, although it took considerable concentration and focus. He was well behaved around the house, having developed a routine to help him to stick to good habits. He would eat his food from his bowl at the appointed times and, even though he would revisit and lick around the empty bowl at times during the day, he never bothered his Master for human food. He made a point of pushing the toilet door shut so that he was never tempted by the water in the toilet bowl. And he had specific times that he tried to keep to go outside to do his "bad dogs". He had never had an accident in the new Master's house, but he always feared that he would lose control and let himself down. Although the new Master had always been kind, he feared what the Master's reaction would be if it should ever happen. The dog became very committed to his routines and in doing so became less flexible. Although his behaviour seemed now to be under control, he found that the very ways in which he was making himself more acceptable actually meant he was investing more time in controlling his behaviour than he was with his Master. And the times when he would sit alone in his basket and gaze sadly at his lifeless tail became more frequent.

Then came the awful day. The Master got up early and left the house, locking the front door behind him. When the dog got up, he tried to get outside to do

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his "bad dog" business, but found the back door hadn't been opened. He was irritated that his routine had been disrupted but decided not to let it throw his whole day out, and skipped straight to his breakfast. By mid-morning he was aware of a great pressure building inside him. He went to the back door, even though he knew it was locked, and whimpered in discomfort. As he limped back through the dining room he was overcome and lost control. He felt awful and relieved all at the same time. He turned around to look at the "bad dog" mess he had made. He felt much better in his lower insides but his stomach turned and seemed to grip the whole of him in tension; a much worse feeling. He knew that the "bad dog" must be cleaned up before his Master's return. He couldn't conceive of the Master finding such an awful thing and of what the master would think of him. So he thought of pushing the "bad dog" mound to somewhere less obvious. He started to push it with his nose, but this only smeared it across the wooden floor and made it smell worse. In panic he tried to wipe the smear up with his ear. It seemed to work, so he pushed the mound further and cleaned up the next smear with his other ear. Before he knew it, he had pushed the mound right around the room, cleaning after it with his fur, and it had all gone.

He was greatly relieved to have cleaned the mess off the floor but it had been at a great personal cost, because by now he was completely covered in

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"bad dog" himself. There was no way that the Master could see him like this. He would have to hide. So he went and hid in a gap between the washing machine and the wall and sat there miserable, dirty and ashamed, with only his shameful tail showing behind him.

When the Master came in, he called for the dog. The dog heard but he didn't move. He feared the Master's reaction, although discovery seemed inevitable. "What is that awful smell?" he heard the Master ask of the air. "It's me," thought the dog, now starting to anticipate the Master's rage. "I'll be thrown out. I don't deserve to live here any way." Again he heard the Master calling him, but closer now. "What has happened to you?" the Master said gently. The dog felt his Master's hands around his chest and he tensed inside. "Don't touch me," he thought. "I'm dirty. I'm 'bad dog'." The dog had been hiding for so long that the "bad dog" on his fur had stuck to the wall, and as his Master lifted him out some of his fur tore out painfully. His Master held him to his chest as he carried him up the stairs. How often had the dog longed to be this close to his Master, but not now. It hurt to be this close. He was so dirty. He hated it. And his "bad dog" was making the Master dirty too. He wished it could be all over. He just wanted to die. Nothing could ever be right again. He struggled to get away, but the Master held him firmly, whispering something softly in his ear that the dog couldn't quite hear, or

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that he couldn't bear to hear. The Master climbed into the shower still holding his dog as he too was soiled. The dog felt the warm water soaking into his fur and skin as it rained down on him, still in his Master's arms. It still smelt bad but the Master was rubbing his fur, making it froth. He could feel that the "bad dog" was coming out. He started to feel cleaner. He turned his head to look at the Master's face. He had never really looked at his face before, but then he had never really been this close before. The Master's hair was wet, and water was running over his face. He was looking back into the face of the dog. The dog felt warmer and safer just gazing and being gazed at. Then as he watched, his Master's mouth started to open. What was he going to say? Would it be good or bad? No words came; but instead the Master's tongue. And he licked the dog's face. An ancient instinct welled up in the heart of the dog and he licked his Master back without even thinking. Just for a second he felt a pang of guilt. "A good dog shouldn't do this," he thought, and remembered the "bad dog" that had been covering him. "What am I thinking?" But the Master just licked him again, and the thought was gone.

The Master dried them both, wrapped the dog up in a fresh, warm, white towel and carried him back downstairs again. He sat down on the sofa, sat the dog next to him, under his arm, and they just sat quietly together. The

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Master shared some of his own food with him as a comfort. The dog had never been allowed on the sofa before and it didn't quite feel comfortable yet. But it felt good to be this close to his Master and the room looked quite different from up here. While they had showered together, the Master has slipped the dog's collar off, and after a while he sat forward and started to refix it around the dog's neck. As he did this, the dog noticed a round metal tag that he'd never noticed before. Maybe this had his name engraved on it as he'd heard that some dogs have. But as he looked he saw that instead it had his Master's name and address on it. He wondered if his name was "Bad Dog" or maybe even that it might now be "Good Dog". But as he saw the tag turn over in his Master's fingers, the metal flashed in the light and he saw the words engraved on the other side. It said simply "My Dog". The dog then became aware of some movement under the towel that was wrapped around him. He looked and saw that it was his tail. It had started to wag again. And after all that effort and worrying, it had just started without him noticing, simply joining in with the rest of him.

It was an important day for the dog and things started to change in the weeks that followed. Even walks were different. He would trot alongside his Master with a new enthusiasm. He would keep looking up at the Master's face to catch his eye, something he'd never done before. When he looked up

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at the Master his nose was above all the smells that had previously distracted him. It was while he was looking up that, one day, he noticed for the first time that his Master wasn't carrying a lead, and indeed that there was no lead attached to his collar. This was so strange that he stopped in his tracks and sat down. As the Master walked away, the dog thought about his collar and the feeling of it tightening. And yes, it did feel tighter, like a lead was tugging on it, as it always had done. But there was no lead. Was it in his mind? The Trainer had always had a lead, and the dog had assumed from the start that his Master had one too. But now he wondered if he'd ever had one. Did his collar feel tight or not? He wasn't sure now. Just then his Master turned back towards him: "Come on, boy." The dog was sure that he could see something in his hand. Was it a lead? No, it looked like a ball. The Master's arm swung back, and a bright red ball soared high into the clear blue sky. The dog's heart leapt. It was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. Without a thought he was after it. He sped across the grass like he had never run before; the wind rushed past his ears, making them flap. He was breathing deeply and strongly. He was alive. The ball bounced just once and he leapt into the air to catch it. He was an excellent jumper. As he ran back towards his Master the dog thought: "This feels wonderful. It feels like me. Can it be wrong?" Then he felt the name tag bouncing against his chest, and although he couldn't see it, he knew what was written on it. He knew whose

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dog he was. "No, it was Master who threw it for me. This isn't wrong." The Master was crouching to receive him with his arms outspread. The dog saved his most excellent jump for now and they spun around together, the trees, grass and sky all blurring into one.

At the end of a happy afternoon with the sun dipping low they walked home together, the dog contentedly at his Master's heel. As they went he saw other dogs out playing with sticks and balls and he smiled inside. "Happy puppies," he thought. He also saw dogs choking at their leads, and he barked the news to them: "You don't have to strain. Don't you know? You don't have to any more."

So life changed for the dog, and he gradually became less restless. Things might not have looked that much different from the outside, but the dog and his Master knew. These days the dog wakes his Master each morning by jumping on to his bed and licking his feet. In the afternoons he sits on the sofa and waits for his Master to come home. There are still some accidents and he does an occasional "bad dog" in the house, but he doesn't try to clear it up himself. He just tells his Master, who cleans it up for him. Sometimes the dog thinks he feels the pull of a lead on his collar, and he needs to

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remind himself that there's nothing there. But one thing that he never does is to drink out of the toilet. It just never crosses his mind now.