

Pepe and Goliath

At the Balmoral Hotel, Edinburgh, we were shown to our table, seated, draped in white napkins and fussed over. With an OTT flourish, menus and a thick wine list were presented. The daily specials were explained and G&Ts were ordered, to get us started.

I hoped this would not be a long boozy lunch. I had other pressing items on my agenda and planned to attend to a few of them on the train back to Glasgow.

My guest Archie donned his *pince nez*, a recent affectation since his appointment to the ranks of the property development team at one of our most important clients, an Edinburgh pensions and assurance company with a large portfolio of buildings scattered throughout the UK and further afield. Until his move, Archie had worked for one of my firm's sternest rivals where he had been an Associate Director, his role one rung below my own. Prior to this getting-to-know-you-better meeting, we had only met at conferences, professional dinners and the like when our brief conversations had been guarded, stinted.

Archie browsed and decided on a fillet steak with all the trimmings. At my invitation, he turned his attention to the wine list and, with a barely detectable smirk, nominated a bottle of French red from the expensive pages. From his reputation, I expected the small, wiry, balding, dandy of a man in his early fifties to be good company although I had been warned he had a reputation for rather right-wing views on most subjects, views I was determined to allow, for the sake of our new business relationship.

To be fair, I have had many much worse lunch guests to entertain and at least we had a common interest in football. He was a Hearts and Liverpool man to my Partick Thistle and Man U. If we got stuck, I would tell him about my four years running a large cub football squad of four teams drawn from six cub packs in Bearsden. However, I soon discovered to my surprise that Archie was still actively involved as the player-manager of an ageing amateur team, playing most Saturday afternoons throughout the year, both summer and winter. With only a little encouragement he set off at a gallop, telling me his war stories.

When the conversation faltered, I dropped in a few stories about our dog, Fleck, at that stage a nine-month-old Border Collie, and centre stage in our lives. I saw Archie stifle a yawn, pulled myself up short and asked:

'Archie, do you have a dog?'

'Well, yes, I suppose I do. What I mean is, I pay all the vet bills and so on and supply the special food which costs a fortune but Pepe lives with my sister-in-law, has done for over a year now.'

'Oh, I see,' I said. I could tell there was a tale to be heard and encouraged him with, 'And what sort of dog is Pepe?'

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'A miniature poodle. We got her around seven years ago, maybe more, when the twins went off to university, Derek to Abertay and Louise to Strathclyde. Now he is working, semi-independent, Derek sometimes stays with us but mainly he lives with Maybelle, his girlfriend. Louise has a wee terraced house round the corner from us and a string of boyfriends, no one special yet. My wife Janine is a fashion buyer with Jenners', away from early doors on Saturdays. Which is ideal as I usually have the house to myself and enjoy a long lazy breakfast with the papers then pack my kit and head off to play with the lads. That's how we lost Pepe to my sister-in-law.'

'Oh? What happened?'

'Well, it was just another Saturday, or so I thought until I got home from football. It was an away game, out to the wilds of Shotts. Even though it was only early October, it was Baltic out there. The ground was rock hard, permafrost, and we had flurries of snow. I was over an hour late - because of the downpour and flooding everywhere. Janine was not well pleased, crashing about the kitchen, you know the sort of thing:

"So, Archie, where's Pepe?"

"Is she not in her wee nest, in the utility room?"

"No, Archie. I've hunted the whole house, even checked the garage. She's not here and half of her breakfast is not eaten. So, where is she?"

"Maybe Derek came round and took her back to Maybelle's?"

"Archie, Maybelle is allergic to dogs, remember? So, where *is* my wee Pepe?"

"Ah, maybe Louise came and took her round to hers?"

"No Archie, Louise is at a Hen Weekend in Prague, remember? So, Archie, *where is my wee doggie?*"

It was only then I remembered.

"Oh God, Janine, I've left her tied up outside the newsagents down at the precinct!"

"Archie, you left her tied up since morning, all day outside, in this weather?"

I ran all the way through the rain and got there just as Mahout was pulling down his roller shutter. I learned that Archie was an excellent mimic:

"Ah, yon wee doggie? Oh, yes, she bark and bark and some wuman call the polis and the van come and take her 'way, you know, for safety, 'case she stoled. Nice wee dog. She yours, eh?"

"Yes, well, my wife's actually."

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"You tell the wife she safe, no worries."

'Back home I called the police who gave me the number for the dog warden service who advised they had taken the dog to the Edinburgh Cat and Dog Rescue kennels near Portobello. When I called it was an answering loop advising they were closed for the weekend. First thing next morning I went out to the place and rang the bell but the wee lassie on the intercom said they were closed unto eight o'clock on Monday morning. I asked about Pepe but she did not have any details. She was a volunteer, just there to groom and feed the animals. When I went to get her on the Monday first thing, Pepe would not speak to me and every time I tried to clap her, she snapped at me.

'The following weekend we were heading off for a winter break to Spain. Moira, Janine's sister, had already agreed to take Pepe, for company. Moira's husband had died a few months earlier. Turns out she had always wanted a dog but her Alan had said pets were a waste of money. He was a right miserly git, was her Alan, where Moira was concerned. Golf was his thing with memberships at four clubs, including Gleneagles, would you believe?'

Archie took a long sip from his glass. The waiter caught my glance and swooped to top it up while I covered my own with my hand. Archie smirked.

'Anyway, when Janine and I got back from Spain we went straight round to collect Pepe. Guess what? The dog would not come to either of us. Moira had a cushion set up for her, right beside her on the settee and, I kid you not, the dog had its very own remote control, right there, between its paws.'

I chuckled dutifully and asked, 'Well, Archie, did you get another dog for Janine?'

'No. According to my darling wife, no dog could ever replace Pepe. It took a few months of walking on eggshells to get over it then fate played me a lucky hand, sort of.'

'Oh, what happened?'

'Well, Callum, Janine's wee brother by eight years, he's a bit of a loose cannon, always in some sort of crisis or other. Well, he was on holiday on Ibiza and met this girl Denise, from Manchester. It was mad passionate love, with the emphasis on 'mad'. She works in a bank and gets a transfer to Edinburgh and moves in with him. Next thing they have a Great Dane pup. They called it Bingo. This was about the same time as Alan died so we had our eye off the ball when this was going on.'

He took another deep swig from his glass and the waiter swooped to refill it

'Anyway, one afternoon while I was at work, this was long before I got this new job, I got a call from Janine's father Tommy:

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"Archie son, kin ye come roond tae mine's the night oan yer way hame. I hae a wee bit o' a problem an' Ah need yer help wi, eh?"

'Turns out that Denise had transferred back to Manchester leaving Callum with Bingo. Callum has asked Tommy to mind the dog for a few days saying he is taking a wee break to sort his head out. When I arrive, Tommy hands me a postcard from Callum which tells his father he has signed up on a two-year contract with the French Foreign Legion. By this stage, Tommy has been looking after Bingo for about three weeks. Tommy is in his seventies with a gammy leg. The dog is running him ragged and his knee is acting up again. I called Janine and she came round. We agree to take Bingo to our house. That night, we put Bingo in the utility room and switched on a radio to keep him company. We lie in bed listening to the Hound of the Baskerville yowling for three hours until we give in and let him upstairs with us. Every time I open my eyes, his big face is right there, breathing on me, drool dribbling onto the towels we've laid out all over the floor to protect our carpet. It was, as they say, 'a right bummer'.'

'So, what did you do?'

'Well, we checked and in theory Bingo was worth quite a bit but it seems that buyers are wary and although we found his pedigree papers at Callum's place, no one wanted an untrained eight-month old Great Dane. In the end I offered him in the small adds for free. I took dozens of calls from wee boys:

"Mister, kin a huv your dug, eh?"

'So, Archie, how did it end up?'

'It took us weeks but eventually a well-heeled older couple from Perthshire arrived in a huge Land Rover Disco and whisked Bingo away as company for their three labs and two golden retrievers. A few weeks later they phoned to say that Goliath, as they had renamed him, was settling well and to thank us again for our kindness.'

'So, are Pepe and Moira still an item?'

'Oh yes, Moira has two other miniature poodles and has started out on the show circuit with them. Both males, on stud duty now.'

'Dare I ask, how is Callum?'

'Living in France, somewhere near Bordeaux, with his new wife Melanie. She's from Wolverhampton originally. They met while picking grapes. No dogs. Melanie is a cat person, it seems.'

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