

# What Next?

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Janet had been homing Rufus the Irish Wolfhound for almost six weeks while his owners Sally and Bert enjoyed a long winter sun break in Tenerife. He had settled well, part of her small family. In her front room, both dogs were asleep at her feet as she awaited her granddaughter's arrival. Like Benito her Lasso Apso, Rufus was a snorer.

Debra, who lived in Lanark, was coming to stay for a long weekend bringing tickets for *Celtic Connections*. Mid-morning Debs had sent a *WhatsApp* saying she hoped to arrive in Bearsden by 4.30 pm. That was before the snow had started. It had been falling steadily since just after lunchtime. Janet had thought of sending a reply suggesting Debra stay at home, but the girl was a member of the Institute of Advanced Driving and had a four-wheel drive Subaru. As a sales manager she drove all over the UK covering around twenty thousand miles a year.

Janet checked her watch: 16:50. Rufus rose, stretched himself and headed for the front door and began howling, asking to be taken for his last widdle walk of the day. While Benito was happy to use her back garden in bad weather, Rufus always dragged her to the local park beside the woods where she use the launcher to throw a well-chewed red rubber ball for him. The huge dog was happy to race after it but when he returned with the ball, he refused to drop it unless she offered a treat. Fortunately, he was happy to accept tiny chips of diced carrots, the healthy vegetarian alternative Sally insisted on.

Debra arrived, tooting her horn. Janet opened the door, straining to hold Rufus by his collar.

'Hi Gran, some weather, eh? Ah, yes, this is Sally's new mutt. How old is he?'

'Eleven months, I think, almost full-grown. Debs, would you be able to take him for a widdle walk, round to the park, please. Just Rufus, Benito's he's not keen on deep snow.'

'Sure, I need to stretch my legs. Ah, is that your world-famous lasagne I can smell? Bags double portions, I missed out on lunch, we went wild swimming. Madness really, we had to break the crust of ice to get into the loch. What a motley crew, twelve totally insane women. At forty-three, I was the youngest but we had Madeline today and she's seventy-seven. What a laugh!'

'Really? Hey-Ho, not for me, thank you very much. Now, here's his ball and thrower. Ten minutes should do it.'

'Right, hold him while I get my puffa coat and snow boots from the car.'

Janet watched them head off into the blizzard. Dressed all in white, at over six feet tall and a size eighteen, with her hood up Debra looked like a yeti.

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'Right, Benito, time to pee-pee, Signore.'

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At the park they seemed to be the only dog-walkers. Debs was dubious about throwing the ball into the white-out, but Rufus was barking madly and she fired off the ball with gusto. Off he raced, immediately invisible.

A few minutes later a large hairy snow-encrusted collie appeared and dropped a different ball at her feet. She held out her hand. The dog came closer to sniff; she kneeled to read the brass collar tag. There was a name but no phone number.

'Ah, Gimble, where is your owner?'

The dog backed away and looked over its shoulder.

'OK, Gimble, *enjoy!*'

Debs threw the tennis ball over the collie and turned to follow the rapidly disappearing track left by the Wolfhound. Up ahead she could see a dark smudge. As she got nearer, she saw a dense copse of stunted, bush-like trees.

'Rufus! Rufus! **Are you in there?**'

An odd high-pitched voice screeched back:

'**Go away!** I don't need help. Go away. If you don't go away, I'll call the police.'

Debs peered into the undergrowth and saw a small domed tent, like a miniature orange igloo. Poking out of the partly unzipped entrance was a large pair of binoculars.

'Sorry to disturb you but have you seen a dog, a big grey dog. He's called Rufus.'

'No, but I saw a Polar bear and a Wolf.'

'Oh, right. Well, good luck.'

'Have **you** seen **my** dog? She's a collie called Gimble?'

Debs weighed up the situation and decided that one lost dog was enough.

'No, sorry. But I'm sure she'll find her way back to you. Collies are way smarter than other dogs.'

As she said these words, Debs thought:

*Perhaps Rufus has headed home to Gran's place?*

As she retreated the voice whimpered:

'No, I saw the Polar bear grabbing her. I think he ate her.'

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Debs headed towards where she hope to find the exit gate. A few minutes later Rufus raced up behind her and knocked her forwards, onto her hands and knees. She grabbed at him and, after a struggle, attached his lead. Rufus had his red rubber ball in his mouth.

They set off again. It took ten minutes to find a path and a further ten until she found the gate and headed for her Gran's house.

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Later, as they relaxed together watching *Eastenders*, Janet glanced up from her tablet:

'According to our local Facebook group we should watch out for a Polar bear and a wolf who have been marauding in the area. Someone says they saw the Polar bear eat a dog and someone else saw a wolf attacking the Polar bear. What next?'