

The Perfect Stranger

She kept poodles. Two, black poodles. She said she'd never had children, but kept dogs instead.

When I first arrived, I told her I didn't like dogs, but it didn't make any difference. They were still in my room every morning, licking my face, while she called, 'walkies,' from the hallway as if it was a joke.

She liked to walk along the lake before breakfast, with Doodles and Noodles. I borrowed a pair of her floral gumboots and went along. My hips weren't happy about it, but she didn't seem to mind my slow pace. It gave us time to talk. James said I should book in for a hip replacement before I got too old. Maybe he was right.

She told me she was a hairdresser and superficially that made sense. The long hair, dyed with subtle highlights, the fashion magazines on the coffee table and the collection of shampoos and products in the bathroom. But she seemed too smart for that. I don't mean to stereotype but you don't expect to talk about science with a hairdresser, do you? But that's all we talked about on those morning walks; quantum physics, black holes, gravity waves and sub-atomic particles. She said I knew more than anybody else she'd ever met. I think that's why she let me stay so long.

I'd retired by then, after forty years at the University, researching and thinking. And the thinking doesn't just stop when you retire. If anything it gets worse. Out of boredom, I started writing letters, mostly complaints to the local paper. You know the sort I mean.

After six months complaining, I spotted the campervan, parked outside the supermarket, a faded 'for sale' sign tucked in the back window. I bought it there and then, didn't even get it checked over first, much to James' dismay.

'You'll be cold and miserable,' he said on his last visit, making me all the more determined to prove him wrong. I think he'd planned to put me in a neat, little retirement home instead.

I started going away for weekends at first, visiting places on my own doorstep, waterfalls, forests, beaches. Then I strayed further afield. A week at a time, I pushed out the boundaries of my known world. Mostly I stayed on campsites, with their free hot tubs and endless showers, but sometimes I parked by the side of the road, in a lay-by where nobody would notice. I was free and happy, and I laughed at James' disapproval.

Until the van broke down.

Two months ago, in the middle of nowhere, it stuttered to a stop.

I'd got lost on my way to a campsite, driving down a country road off a county road between paddocks.

I got out and looked around. Nothing, except fields and cows. And between them, one tree-lined driveway leading off to the right. No cellphone reception.

Sitting by the campervan I waited for an hour. Nothing came.

I stood and wandered down the driveway. I had no choice. Eight o'clock on a Saturday evening. Dusk falling.

She opened the heavy front door, and the two poodles came bounding up to greet me, their paws leaving scratches across the polished rimu floor. I asked if I could use the phone. But when she passed it to me, I didn't know who to call. I certainly wasn't going to call James. He would've rescued me in his sports car, basking in my humiliation.

She offered me dinner, hot smoked salmon, quinoa salad, and a bottle of wine. I said I'd sleep in the van but she insisted I took the spare room.

I was only going to stay one night, until I could get someone to fix the campervan. But then, on that first morning, the six o'clock face licking, the 'walkies' and suddenly I was marching around the lake. She asked me about my work, my life, and that's when we started talking. I told her everything. She seemed so interested in me. She told me I was beautiful, the perfect stranger and I was flattered.

I asked her about mending the van.

'We'll take a look at it later,' she said. So we did. That afternoon. We opened the bonnet and peered at the mass of engine that refused to do anything.

She gave it a kick and laughed. 'That should fix it.' But it didn't. It was Sunday, everywhere was closed.

'Do you have jump leads?' It was the only thing I could think of.

She shook her head. 'You'll have to stay.' And I could tell she was pleased.

She went to work the next day, after the morning walk, leaving me alone with the dogs. She'd spent ages getting ready, doing her hair, choosing what to wear. She came out of her room five or six times in different combinations of black and asked me what I thought. I told her she looked gorgeous in all of them and she seemed happy enough with that.

After she'd gone, I tried the phone but it was dead. No internet either and I couldn't find my cellphone. Must be getting old. My hips were complaining after the walk so I chose a book, settled down to read and waited for her to come home.

That's how it went for the first few days, walkies, breakfast, reading, then dinner and talking. And to be honest with you I enjoyed myself, being looked after by someone who seemed so interested in my career. She said she'd arranged to have the van fixed and in the meantime we may as well share good food and nice wine.

There was no television or radio, so I read my way through her book collection, mostly murder mysteries. Agatha Christie, Ngaio Marsh, Conan Doyle.

But after a week, I started to get restless.

'I need to get the van fixed now,' I say over dinner.

'I'm sorting it, don't worry.'

'I really can't impose on you any longer.'

'It's no imposition.'

I sigh.

'I'll call the garage again tomorrow.' She smiles and pours another glass of Sauvignon Blanc.

'Now, tell me more about anti-matter.'

But tomorrow comes and goes and nobody arrives to fix the van.

A week later I try again.

'I really need to get going. James will be worried about me.'

'Didn't the chap from the garage come last week?' She feigns surprise. 'I'll ask him again. You should've said something.'

And maybe I should.

After she's gone to work, I trudge up the driveway, my hips screaming with every step. I turn the key in the ignition, hoping it'll burst into life. It doesn't.

The next day I refuse to get out of bed.

'Suit yourself,' she says, the dogs scampering after her.

I lie alone, miserable, as I listen to her whistling. There's nothing I can do. By the time she's back from the walk, I'm dressed and making breakfast. I let the poodles lick my fingers.

'I told you you'd grow to like them.' She sips her coffee.

'They're adorable,' I say and I wonder if she can tell I'm lying.

My keys go missing. I ask her about it over breakfast.

'I took them to the garage. I told you. Don't you remember?' She laughs, mocking me.

'What about my phone? That's gone too.'

'It's so easy to lose things at your age. Maybe you dropped it on the way round the lake.'

So I spend the day walking the path, tracing every footprint. I find nothing. That's what I expected. That evening I can hardly stand up.

She cooks lamb, slowly stewed with beans, herbs and dates. She pours red wine and tears a loaf of bread into pieces.

'Bon appetit,' She raises her glass and I look away.

We eat in silence.

She doesn't wake me the next day, but walks the dogs alone. I don't mind. It's raining. After she's gone to work, I eat breakfast and make sandwiches. The dogs watch.

I gather my things together, look for my purse, but it's gone too. I don't waste any time searching for it, instead I hobble up the driveway to where the van should be. It's not there. And somehow that doesn't surprise me.

I stand on the side of the road in the drizzle, with my thumb out, looking for a lift into town, a lift anywhere. Nothing comes, not even a tractor. I try to limp down the road but my hips yell at me to stop. A silver car pulls over.

She winds down the drivers' window.

'What are you doing?' She frowns, opening the passenger door.

I get in and she drives back to the house. She takes my bag and ushers me inside. Doodles and Noodles rush up to meet us, licking my hands with their wet tongues.

'What shall we have for dinner?' she asks.