

# Puppies

By Richard Spurling

So this joker walks into the pub, tosses his hat onto the bar, asks for a beer, skulls the thing and demands another.

The barman says: “You gonna pay for them George?”

“Not after what I’ve been through Pat.”

“Then piss off ya mug.”

George glared at Pat. Pat glared at George. The darts match paused. Two blokes in the corner forgot their argument about last weekend’s football game. George’s tail twitched. It looked like things were going to get ugly and I moved towards the door.

Pat sighed. “What’s happened?”

George’s tail changed from a twitch to a swish.

I sensed the tension in the room ease and the bloke in the corner called the umpire a mug. His partner stared in disbelief then attacked the quality of his mate’s eyesight and mental agility. The next player took his throw at the dart board but missed the board, missed the backboard and dug a piece out of the plaster of the wall. “Watch it ya drunken mugs,” yelled Pat.

George climbed onto a stool. His tail lashed his legs. His ears flicked but with an action that suggested tension rather than listening to the room. He drained his beer, dug into a pocket and tossed a fifty onto the bar.

Pat gave him another beer. I suspected that he would have got it regardless of the money. “So what happened George?”

The buzz of conversation rose in the room. One man moved from the bar to a table and tried to watch the darts match. The football argument rose in volume if not in quality. Another bloke sitting at the bar turned his back towards George.

That left Pat and me being the only people in the room listening the big bloke with all the hair. Pat grabbed a towel and began to polish a glass in the traditional, publican’s listening pose, but his movements were stiff, his eyes a little too fixed on his patron, his jaw muscles a little too tense. I realised that I was the only one really interested in this story and tried to ignore the sudden pressure in my bladder and bowels.

“Fucking Murphy,” said George. “Him and his flamin’ dogs.” He didn’t elaborate and I guessed that he didn’t have to, that Murphy’s dogs were well known and feared. But feared by him? He didn’t look scared, just annoyed. Not even angry, despite that lashing tail. Something in his tone and the way he licked his fangs between sips dispelled ‘anger’, diminished it to a lesser emotion. A slow grin spread across his face – it was like watching a movie in slow motion, and the effect sent electric jolts surging through my body.

In that moment, I felt a fleeting urge to run, an urge that turned to stone as my body turned numb and I knew that I was listening to death discussing a bad day at the office. Smoke from a afternoon’s cigarette’s filled the room but it seemed to darken from grey to charcoal, the scented mix of beer and sweat and cigarettes took on a richer texture and shadows flitted through the room.

I waited for George to change, to gain the black, hooded cape and clawed hand of legend. He didn’t. Just sat on his stool looking like an oversized collie dog in working clothes out for a spree. Then he looked at me and smiled, a smile that drew his lips back from long, white fangs

and exposed the healthy, pink of his tongue and gullet. “Got the big black mongrel though,” he said to me. “Tasty.”

I nodded.

“You need to leave Murphy’s missus alone,” said Pat. His tone surprised me with its calm, matter of fact tone – he could have been counselling any other patron about eyeing off another man’s wife. Perhaps he was because he added: “That last lot of puppies still haven’t been placed.”

George growled. I could sense his chest vibrating. He drained his beer and Pat replaced it.

The room fell silent.

A door opened, the door that opened onto the street. I looked across and saw a large, ugly, angry man. Murphy. I hadn’t seen him before but instinct drew the connection for me.

“You bloody mongrel. That was me best dog.”

The words carried threats of sudden violence. They caused no disturbance in George – he turned to face the intruder.

“Then keep them chained.”

“You’ll have to ...”

He didn’t finish his demand but from the way George’s head dropped, I sensed he understood.

A large, shaggy dog pushed past Murphy. She looked part Wolf, part German Shepherd, lots of parts of things big and canine. She wined at George. Murphy pulled her back with a leather leash that could have towed a truck. Perhaps he needed one that thick – it showed the suppleness and wear of long use.

George looked Murphy in the eye. “Give a yell come pig season. I’ll go beater. That settle it?”

“No. Come and get rid of those bloody puppies.”

“Hey man. They’re yours. You do it.”

“I’ll bloody drown them.”

Everyone in the room froze. The atmosphere itself seemed to chill a few degrees. I saw the hackles rise along George’s neck where it disappeared into his shirt. His tail began that twitch again.

Murphy stared back at George.

*The man’s got a death wish,* I thought.

“I’ll take them,” I said.

George and Murphy looked at me. Murphy’s mouth fell open. George gave me that smile again, but this time, I sensed a mateship.

“Course, you’ll have to give me some consideration,” I said.

“He means you have to pay him and provide something for their keep,” said George.

“Well, a bit more than that,” I said. “I’ll be holding him responsible for any problems with their upbringing so far.”

Murphy’s bitch wined and when she looked at me, her tail wagged. She seemed to understand though I detected no mix in her genes – all canine.

“They ready to take?” I said.

“Yeah,” said Murphy. “Got them onto meat a week back. Not catching for themselves yet, but one of me cats has gone missing.”

“Good. Deliver them to my truck please. It’s parked out the back. Tail gate’s unlocked. Come into the bar when you’ve finished.”

Murphy gave me a look that suggested frustrated violence and dragged his bitch from the room. The dog kept her eyes on me, head craned over her shoulder as the man pulled on the lead.

“Not your type?” asked George.

I shook my head. “When I was in my youth. Not now. Too settled.”

“Haven’t got your own bitch at home?”

I shook my head and felt my own tail begin to twitch. This wolf was getting too personal. But he was young and would learn.

“You one of those puppy rescuers we keep hearing about?” he said.

There was no reply I felt like giving. It was fools like this that had created the crisis. Why couldn’t he just devour pups at birth like any respectable pack member. That was the problem. The old packs had broken down as we’d let human taint the gene pool. Now the old ways were dying, some forgotten. Only a few of us retained the knowledge and the traditions and the world was full of cross breeds. But our culture could be retrieved. That’s what we believed ... some of us, the despised ‘puppy rescuers’. But our day would come. We would return to strength and take our place beside human society. Then, maybe, we’d be able to reinstitute the oldest of our traditions, and return to regarding them as prey.