

LOST AND FOUND

She found me at the beach. It was one of those cold, grey days where the sea and sky are one and the wind thinks nothing of cutting you in half. Seeing her skinny and shivering didn't make me feel good. If I had to choose, I was a cat man; dogs were for working and I had no need for a working dog nowadays. Turning for home and bracing against the head wind, I caught the look in her eyes, but I was good at not caring.

Of course, she followed me, mile after mile along that lonely stretch of endless beach. She slowed when I stopped to check the boundary fences out of habit and then followed me through the paddocks, now strangled with gorse, to the front step, or what was left of it.

"You'd best come in then," I said with the words sounding strange and out of place. I lit the chippy, put on the kettle and warmed my hands on the chipped mug of rum with a dash of tea. All the while she looked at me, long and steady.

"I guess I'd best get you something to eat," I mumbled out loud, getting up to peer into the near-empty cupboard. "You can eat what I eat and there had better not be complaints."

She polished off tinned corn beef with tomatoes, then settled down to gaze into the fire, creeping closer to my chair with every groan and wheeze of the old house. That's where we slept and in the morning, when I woke up stiff and cold, with a pounding head, I wondered again what I was going to do with this skinny bag of bones.

"Well now, I'll clear this bit of porch for you, till I can find your people," I said out loud for no good reason. She gazed up with a look that only a down-and-out dog can give. I cleared away the bottles and tin cans and got some blankets off the guestroom bed. May as well put them to use I thought, the last guest having departed close to 30 years ago. I burnt the stacks of rubbish and felt a small flicker of satisfaction, so I kept going from the porch to the kitchen. The table was cleared of broken farm debris that was never going to get fixed and I pushed the dust around the floor, watching it settle into new spots. She watched me – I mean really watched me – and when I had finished fixing her a place, she walked straight back inside and lay down beside my chair.

That was how it was from then on, she'd walk into a room and look around to find a spot to lay down in the weak winter sun and I'd look around, too, and remember. "Might as well open a window and chuck out these tractor parts," I'd say out loud and she'd look at me in agreement, as I strained against the protesting window and the passage of time.

The grey days slid by, one into the next, as blurry and unchanging as the distant horizon. Then the days started to soften and the paddocks tossed up daffodils and snowdrops where they had always sprung, only this year I took some notice.

"My Maggie planted these," I said, noticing the strangeness of saying her name. I picked some and stuck them in a can, placing them over the tractor grease stain on the kitchen table.

She had put on some weight around the middle and looked a hell of a lot better, but she still kept to her slow, quiet ways. Every now and again I'd think to go to town and put up a lost dog notice, but I figured her people had finished with her when they left her in such an isolated spot. And the truth was, I was liking having her around. She was no bother and it got me to fixing a meal every night instead of heading straight to the bottle.

Then one morning, she was gone. I thought of calling for her, but I hadn't given her a name. I hadn't needed to, she was always just

there. It didn't feel good not knowing where she had gone, it didn't feel good at all. The day seemed to slow right down, like those long, grey winter days, where there doesn't seem much point to anything at all.

That night I served her dinner on the porch and gave another round of whistles with no luck. I'd pinged off a good-size hare, so I hoped the smell might bring her home.

That's when I heard her. The wind had turned and the night was otherwise still and crisp. I followed the sound and knew what I would find, feeling like an old fool for not guessing it earlier. She was in a bad way, three pups out and one stuck, who knows for how long. I'd pulled out more stuck lambs and calves than I'd had hot dinners, so it didn't take long to get the little fur ball out.

Suddenly, there he was in my hand, all slick and completely helpless. Well, I don't know why, but something about that little fella gasping for his first breath got to me like no lamb or calf ever had. It washed over me, shook me up real bad and broke me down. That dark shadow that had been visiting me for years got me around the throat and the more I gasped, the tighter it got.

I felt it and heard it all over again; the worried voices of the doctors and nurses, running feet, red on the bed and then on the floor, and all the wrong words. "Sorry, sorry, sorry," like bullets. Then the cold stillness where there should have been life and noise. When it was finished with me, I rolled exhausted onto my back in the damp grass and looked up into the empty night. There was no comfort for me up there, no star with their names, no heaven, no answer or reason, no damn thing that made any bloody sense to me. Just blackness.

I felt the rise and fall of my chest. Why am I still bloody breathing? "I'm still bloody breathing!" I yelled into the night sky. She raised her head at the sound of my voice and dropped it on my arm, giving me one of her looks. "You did good, girl, real good," I said, giving her a pat. "Best get you inside, then."

That night after she ate a little. We sat by the fire in the way good friends can sit, quiet like, while the tears came slow and steady, like the perfect rain after a long drought, till the rum took me away. "I'd best think of a name for you then, my girl," I said in the morning.

The pups wiggled and fought for the best spot against their mother's warm side, while she stretched and yawned the tired yawn of a contented mother.

The days went by as they tend to do. I'd shoot a rabbit and fix her a good meal and she'd feed those greedy little blind balls of fluff. I didn't have anything much better to do, so I'd watch their funny little puppy ways and let them chew holes on top of holes in my socks and boots.

As the weeks passed, I figured five dogs was more than one cat man could handle so I wrote the notice: "Three pups need good home, see Jack Brown." I figured I'd keep the boy pup for myself. The notice sat on the kitchen table for a couple of weeks till the smell of puppy piss drove me to action. I heated some water, had an attempt at a shave, washed and put on some clothes that could still pass for clothing.

I hadn't been out the front gate for years. Mrs Jackson, the nearest neighbour, had taken to doing my shopping in the early days, but she had since died. I guess the townsfolk saw me as a bit of a charity project as the groceries kept coming year after year. My mate from school, Sam the Postie, left the rum and I left the money under a stone where the mailbox had once stood. In the early days, when folks still had some hope for me, there had been the odd visit from the church folk, a cake or stew dropped off, but that had stopped and that suited me just fine. That's how I found myself standing on the road, waiting for a ride to town. A cattle truck stopped; no-one I knew and that was good. We

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talked about cattle and prices, and I might just have passed for a farmer that knew something, but I guess the look of me told a whole different story. Town was the same, except for some creative graffiti and a shiny new bank that sure didn't look friendly. The faces looked familiar, but too young and fresh to be anyone I had known. I put up my notice at the post office and thought to see if Sam was there, but didn't do anything with the thought.

I figured while I was here I may as well look around. I walked to the end of main street, a few folks looked at me like they knew me and some most likely did, but no-one stopped me and so I kept walking. I found myself at the little church yard cemetery. I hadn't had it in my mind to come here, it had just happened and once there I didn't really know what to do.

I took off my hat and pulled out some weeds. I had been a talkative man, till I stopped talking and found the hollow echo of the bottom of a bottle to be the only sound I liked. But that day I had a lot to say. It wouldn't have made much sense to anyone who might have been passing, but I knew my Maggie would get the gist of it. I told her what a useless good-for-nothing I had become, how I'd wasted my life and drank the farm, and more; things I didn't even know myself till I had said them. I told her about dreams that were so real and happy with us all together only to wake to days that robbed me and left me just breathing. Then I told her about the pups and how she would have a pink fit if she saw the state of her kitchen floor. When I was done I said goodbye like I should have 30 years ago and kissed her and our baby son, resting on her chest and turned for home.

I guess you could say that was a miraculous spring; the kind when something unexpected happens. When something that surely was dead throws up a shoot and leans into the sun.

No-one ever did come for the pups. I called the girl pups Snowdrop, Daffodil and Blue Bell, and the boy Mate. As for the mother, I called her Spring. That was five years back and I'm guessing she knows that I'm not going to see the next one.

She sits by my side every day in her quiet, steady way, watching me breathe in and out, and not much more. Sam the Postie stops in nowadays. I left him a note and pretty much spelt it out to him and that I wouldn't have bothered anyone if it hadn't been for the dogs. He got the track graded so he can get his mail van up to the house. When he has time, he'll stop and when he hasn't, he gives me a toot and I give him a wave so he knows I'm still with the living. He's given up talking about doctors and the hospital – no use bothering those good folks with this booze-wreaked body, I tell him. Besides, I have to look after the dogs.

I'm still a useless good-for-nothing and a drunk, but when I look into that black empty sky for the last time, I know I'll have a quiet, steady gaze to ease me out and that's a hell of a lot more than I deserve. 



**AUTHOR
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This month's writer, a nurse with a masters in tropical population health, has spent her career nursing in remote communities of Australia. She recently returned to New Zealand after 23 years and has settled in Blenheim with her husband and son. Her experience of the changing seasons in Marlborough has reminded her of the passing of time and how all things must change. This story was inspired by spring – and its promise of new beginnings.

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