

And I always thought I was a cat person

I saw her again today, striding out along the ridge, her long auburn hair blowing back from her face as the brown dog lolloped in front of her. Occasionally it stopped to check if she was still following. Tomorrow I might wave or say a cheery hello. If I had the courage.

I trudged along, pounding the roadway into submission under new trainers. My lungs screamed as I fought to breathe. The waist band of my shorts pinched the soft flesh of a six pack that resembled a barrel. By the time I reached home, sweat was streaming down my face despite the cool autumn air.

‘Well Fred’ I said as the cat curled round my ankles, ‘I knew I’d put on a bit of weight. Funny how it’s crept up on me.’ I measured out my porridge.

The phone burbled into life. It was Jack. ‘Heh bro, coming for a beer tonight?’

‘Alcohol is for weekends only, remember?’ A few months ago, it would have been different.

‘You’re beginning to sound like an old married man—’ He stopped. ‘Sorry. You know what I mean.’

‘Yeah. I do.’ I’d been happy being a married man although I certainly wasn’t old. It had been Sophie who hadn’t wanted to grow old with me.

‘If you change your mind?’ He left the words hanging in the air. ‘The landlord’s taken on a real beauty.’ He sighed. ‘So far the old Jack charm isn’t working.’

‘If you reckon, I’m going to sit around while you make out, think again.’

‘Aw come on. I could do with a bit of support.’

‘If I change my mind, I’ll know where to find you.’ I hung up. ‘I might give it a go later,’ I said to Fred and bent down to feed him. He was Sophie’s cat originally. Her new man was a corporate suit who lived in a chrome and glass, city flat where animals aren’t allowed. Fred, like me, was ditched as unwanted baggage.

I didn’t see the girl for a couple of days. I was beginning to think I’d imagined her when she turned up again with a different dog. Although I don’t know one end of a pooch from the other, I can remember the first was sandy brown and this one was black and white. Did she take them out in turn? I was just about to call out a cheery ‘Hi there? Nice animal,’ when the dog set off at a jog and she followed it down the other side of the ridge and out of sight. That’s the route I’d take tomorrow.

Except the freak weather of snow, gales and thick ice under foot sent me to the gym for a week or two and by the time I’d got back, it was dark when I left for my run. I was making good time that morning when I spotted a disembodied light heading towards me along the roadway. And

it was accompanied by two sets of flashing lights set low to the ground. I slowed down and stopped. The lights came closer...and revealed themselves as the collars of two small dogs. Behind them was the girl. She was dressed from head to toe in blue. A beam of light shone from her headband. 'Good morning' she called out as she zoomed past and was gone.

Other males of the species might have thought up a bit of banter to call out after her, a witty repartee that would mean she realised she was in the company of a great guy with a mean sense of humour. I'm not like that. Besides, accosting a lone female, even if she is accompanied by dogs on a dark morning is probably not the best start to a friendship. At least, *she* had broken the ice. It would be easier to start up a proper conversation tomorrow. Except she didn't reappear. It didn't matter. It was probably a lost cause. Like me.

Anyway, after six weeks of my regime I felt I deserved a weekday treat so after work, I headed to the local pub. Jack was there. 'Bro, this is a surprise.' His eyes lit up with the prospect of a drinking buddy. He signalled to the bar tender. 'A pint of your special on tap for my pal here and one for yourself.'

'I'll have mineral water. Thanks.' I stopped dead in my tracks. It was the girl. 'Hi,' she said. 'How's the jogging going?'

'You two know each other?' Jack's mouth was hanging open like a bloodhound.

'Only by sight.' I said. 'How are your dogs?'

'Which ones?' She placed my pint on the bar and I noticed how her eyes were like the colour of the beer, rich and golden brown. I must have pulled a face as she added, 'I'm a dog sitter and walker so I have a number of charges that need regular attention.'

'And you work here too?'

'I have to. I'm paying my way through a course in dog care. Sorry. Got to go serve' and she took that slender body to the other end of the bar. 'See you out running tomorrow?'

'Which dog will it be? Those ones with the lit up collars are cute.'

'No such luck. It's Bruno the collie.'

'My favourite breed' I lied. 'I'll be there.'

Jack was sitting, cradling his pint. 'I have spent pounds in this bar, listening to old boys talk endlessly about the intricacies of cricket. I have discussed Saturday football results in microscopic detail until Wednesday and I've taken an interest in pub quizzes. And what for? *Hi Jack. The usual?* You turn up and get talking to the lovely Tasha in one go. I just don't get it.'

'We have plenty in common.' I preened myself and took a sip of my beer.

'Such as?'

'Dogs and running of course.'

His reply was unrepeatable but I had a feeling I might be seeing a lot more of Tasha in the next few weeks. I only hoped she liked cats too.