

The Marzipan Dog



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*T*he Marzipan Dog was not a Christmas present, but he arrived at Christmas time, with hairy breath and claws that clicked on the kitchen floor. Beth's parents kept him in the garage as a surprise.

“But it's not Christmas yet,” she said, as they pressed a small box into her hands. Not a box done up with ribbon that went into twirls when it was scraped along a scissor blade, but one that slid open easily, with paper that made crinkly sounds when Beth ripped it off. Inside, the chain was heavy in her hand. Longer than a necklace, with a clip at one end and a loop at the other, and Beth slid her hand through the end and knew what it was.

“He's here!” she cried. “Is he here? Is he really?”

Then the door was opening, with the slow catch on carpet that she was used to, and quick heavy footsteps, the sound of happy breaths, and Beth was on her knees with her arms out, and the Marzipan Dog came to her, all

floppy-eared and the back half of him wagging from side to side, the solid thump of his tail knocking against her ribs like a heartbeat.

“The people who were training him thought you might like to have him a bit early,” said her Dad, laughing. “Give you time to get used to each other, they said. A bit unusual, but I reckon they just wanted shot of him. Probably to get out of feeding him over the holidays...”

“What colour is he?” said Beth. The coarse fur, the fat, happy snout all said *Labrador* to her. The dog settled by her feet, let her feel the harness about him, let her run her hands over his body from tail to nose tip, let her scratch the furry belly, obliging. He made deep, satisfied grunts when Beth’s fingers found a particularly ticklish spot behind one leg.

“He’s chocolate,” said Mum. “A nice deep brown. His ears are a little darker, and one of them pricks up higher than the other.”

“I can feel,” said Beth.

“I can’t believe you’re here,” said Beth, whispering into her pillow. The Marzipan Dog rolled over her feet, having heaved himself onto the bed. When Beth reached down she could feel his head under her hand, hear his deep breathing above the footsteps in the corridor, the footsteps coming towards her. “I can’t stop thinking they’re going to take you away,” she said. “That they’ll tell me it’s all a mistake and your real owner’s waiting for you.”

The door swung open and there was a crash, the smell of warm milk, as Beth’s mum saw the Marzipan Dog curled up on the bed and dropped the Milo she’d been carrying.

“Mum?” said Beth, alarmed.

“It’s nothing,” said her mother. “Don’t worry. I thought I saw something, but it’s only the dog. Are you sure you want it on the bed?”

The Marzipan Dog was greedy. There was no getting around it. He was hard-working and patient and loyal and unfailingly good-tempered, even when Beth stood on a paw by accident. But he was, unmistakably,

a greedy dog, and that was how he got his name. “His *proper* name,” as Beth put it. She refused to call him Libby—“It’s a terrible name, he’s not a bitch”—and his real name, Libra, was just too embarrassing.

“At least they didn’t call you Aquarius,” said Beth, sitting with the dog’s head in her lap and running her fingers over a Braille page in one of her school books. “That would have been humiliating for both of us.”

He was renamed when Beth was rolling marzipan for Christmas cake. She liked to make little figures out of the remnants—snowmen, mostly because they were easiest and could be trusted to turn out recognisable at least. “Funny decorations to have in summer, though,” she said, passing them over to her friend.

Aisha sat on the other side of the table, as far from the dog as possible. She was painting faces on the figures, giving them scarves and rows of buttons like caterpillars. “It’s not my holiday,” she said. “Snowmen are no stranger than the rest of it.”

And Beth, who would have complained, would have teased her back and poked fun until they finished in sticky-fingered giggles, said nothing. It was obvious to

her that Aisha was trying, trying as hard as she could. Behaving as though things were normal seemed like it would take away from that. As though Beth didn't recognise the effort.

In the absence made by abnormality, Libra sneaked marzipan from the table and, almond-mouthed, was given his new name.

“It's your fault we have to go to the shops,” said Beth. “You were the one who ate it all.”

The Marzipan Dog gave a guilty little whine.

“Don't blame me—I don't want to go,” said Beth. Aisha had sports practice so Beth was left to find the replacements herself. “The lady behind the counter's horrible. She always sighs like dealing with me's too much trouble. Like I'm being lazy not getting milk or marzipan or whatever myself.” But this time, there was no difficulty—just a small and ugly squeal, and the soft patter of feet beside her, again and again as if doubled.

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to do,” Aisha had said, when she first came round after the Marzipan Dog’s arrival.

“Just let him sniff your hand,” said Beth, and demonstrated. “Like this.” But Aisha was shy, unaccountably shy, it seemed, and it wasn’t until Beth took her shaking fist in her own hands and held it out for sniffing that Beth clicked as to why.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t think.”

“That’s alright,” said Aisha. “I can do it. Just don’t go expecting me to pet him or anything. And no licking.”

“Let me put my hands around yours,” said Beth, and wrapped Aisha’s clenched fist in her own, felt the Marzipan Dog’s whiskers brush against her skin, heard the dog snuffle at the mixed scent of them together. He kept his tongue to himself, and Beth was grateful.

Aisha didn’t say anything, but Beth heard her washing her hands after, over and over.

Aisha’s little brother Azmi didn’t get close enough to touch. He came over one night to be babysat, brought by his sister so she and Beth could listen to music

together while they watched him. Beth introduced him to the Marzipan Dog, but when the fur beneath her fingers thickened, Azmi began to cry so that he had to be taken away again.

“I could bring him round to your place sometime,” said Beth. “Show the kid there’s nothing to be scared of.”

There was an awkward pause. “I wouldn’t,” said Aisha. “Service animals are one thing in theory, but...”

“It’s okay,” said Beth. “It is. It’s fine. It’s not like I need him to get round your house anyway.” And she didn’t: Aisha’s parents were nearly as solicitous as her own, and going on twelve years of visits and sleepovers meant their house was familiar ground. Aisha’s dad had even put a braided rope railing on the deck stairs for her, and her mother made sure to take her round and introduce her to every new piece of furniture she bought so that Beth wouldn’t trip over it unawares.

She could always walk there with her cane.

“I’ll just have to come over to yours more often,” said Aisha. “Till you’re sick of the sound of me.” Aisha’s

hair was smooth in her hands, and thick. Beth liked to brush it out, to braid it into coils and wind it round her head. If she couldn't see the fine strands, she could feel them, silk against her skin and smelling faintly of oil, and when her comb caught in the tangles she could work them out with her fingers and brush until there was nothing left for the comb to catch on. That it would be covered by Aisha's head scarf did not disappoint her. If Beth couldn't see it, it was only fair that other people couldn't see it either.

“They'd totally be jealous if they could,” said Aisha, complimentary, and Beth beamed as her hands skimmed and plaited.

This was something she could do without help, something she could do without a guide. The Marzipan Dog sat away from her, an absence of body against her leg. That was mostly because Aisha was wary about him, still, and didn't like having him too close. She would sit on the floor with him, her back against the sofa and having her hair tugged by strands, but she wouldn't share the leaning of him, wouldn't cuddle up to him as Beth did. Yet when they sat together, Beth could hear the faint

snap and swallow of the Marzipan Dog, the muted *thump* of his tail on the carpet from the warm spot over by the window.

“Are you feeding my dog?” she said, amused.

“It’s those big eyes,” said Aisha, the bowl balanced in her lap and her head tilted to one side so that Beth could better reach the hair above her ears. “In that ugly, ugly face.”

“I didn’t know he ate popcorn,” said Beth.

“That creature eats *anything*,” said Aisha. “And he catches very well. I’ll say this for him: he has the manners not to come eat from my hand. I couldn’t stand the slobber.”

“It’s only drool,” said Beth.

“It’s disgusting, that’s what it is,” said Aisha, and threw more popcorn. “Filthy, nasty thing. If he ever tries to lick me, I warn you now. I’m going to scream.”

Thump, thump.

“That’s why he stays away, then. He probably couldn’t stand the shrieking,” said Beth, and tugged another braid into place.

He couldn't stand it, but he caused it. Somehow, Beth knew, he caused it. Usually the Marzipan Dog sat by her in class, sat silent at her feet and snoozed, and sometimes she had to nudge him with her foot when he began to snore. She didn't like it when he snored, because there were girls sitting next to her who would make fun of him, make fun of her. They always did, and always just loud enough so that they could be heard by Beth and Beth alone. And one day they started up again, and the Marzipan Dog was not asleep, and his weight on her foot changed, became cooler and harder and had the press of scales against her bare leg and the stench of salt water and mud rose up about her and there was screaming then, and shrieking, and the thump of feet on the floor and then the teacher was beside her, soothing and gentle and fur was soft against her leg again and the Marzipan Dog panted at her knee, panted happily and with satisfaction.

If Aisha stood a little distant from her now, she still walked with Beth on the way to school. Usually they took Azmi with them, but lately he'd been following

behind, following with others, and Beth could feel the tension in her friend. It was familiar to both of them.

“There’s always someone,” said Beth, and for a moment it was as if nothing was different between them.

She’d get the easier time of it, usually. The other kids would tease, and be unkind sometimes, but spent more time making fun of Aisha’s head scarf than they did Beth’s cane, and, of the two objects, it had never been hers that had been grabbed. And now the Marzipan Dog was there—and even if the comments continued, no-one would ever try to grab him. The Marzipan Dog, Beth was sure, would fight back, and when Aisha was with her no-one would risk getting too close to tease her either.

That would have been enough, in its way, if Aisha didn’t have to put up with the rest of it—except the teasing came this time from the boys who had always been on her side before, the boys who had sisters who wore scarves of their own.

“What are you doing with that dog?” one said to Beth.

“He’s a service animal,” she replied.

“I didn’t mean the Labrador.”

And Aisha said nothing, nothing. Just took Beth’s arm and steered her away from the calls and the jeers even when Beth didn’t want to go, when she wanted to turn around and scream at them.

“Don’t walk away when I’m talking to you, bitch!” she heard. The boys were back behind them again, and she held the lead of the Marzipan Dog tense in her fingers.

“Just ignore them,” said Aisha, under her breath, before she swung about herself. “Come away from them, Azmi,” she said. “You’ll be late for school.”

“I’m not a dog!” Azmi piped up, his childish voice loud as if he were trying to sound more grown up than he was, as if he were trying to impress boys a decade his senior, boys who were more interested in Aisha than her little brother. “You can’t tell me what to do!”

“Tell that to Mum and Dad,” said Aisha, and there was a soft smack and a gasp and Beth heard a little rattle like a pebble had fallen at her feet.

“Shan’t,” said Azmi, but he sounded young again now, and uncertain.

“Aisha,” said Beth. “What’s happening? What’s going on?”

Aisha pulled her aside, quickly, as if out of the way, and there was the sound of more pebbles behind her. And then Beth understood, and anger rose in her like a wave, and the Marzipan Dog whirled around and broke free of her hold, broke free of the harness and lunged away from her. He was snarling, a deep, savage sound that Beth had never heard him make before.

She tried to catch him as he burst away from her, but her fingers couldn’t grip the heavy fur and then there were startled shouts, the sound of feet running away, and Azmi screaming and screaming.

There was a knock at the door.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” said Beth. She sat in her room, cross-legged on the floor, and the muzzle of the Marzipan Dog rested in her lap.

“It helps, sometimes, to talk,” said her dad. “Or to listen, even. It wasn’t your fault.”

“I know.”

“Can I come in?”

“No,” said Beth, and rolled her eyes when she heard the handle rattle. “Why ask if you’re only going to ignore me?” But the pressure lifted off her leg, a sudden loss of fur and warmth, and the door opened just a fraction and stilled as the Marzipan Dog shifted beside her, shifted with a soft low scrape of leather, with a hint of breeze and unfurling, and the door snapped shut again.

“I’m sorry about the brat,” said Aisha. “If it’s any consolation, Dad smacked his arse and lectured him about respect and showing-kindness-to-living-things. I suppose he meant the dog, but he could have been talking about you.”

“Oh ha, ha,” said Beth. She was picking at her feet, at the pink roughened skin that came from sudden bursts of new activity. “I think I’ve got a blister.”

“Serves you right for being so lazy,” said Aisha, who was on the netball team and even did cross-country, sometimes, although she complained about it.

“The Marzipan Dog wants to explore,” Beth replied, defensive. “It’s much more fun with him than with a cane, or hanging on someone’s arm.”

“I know,” said Aisha. She was silent for a long moment. “Azmi’s making you a card... to say he’s sorry.”

“That’s... nice,” said Beth, uncertain, and sceptical as well, though she would not say so.

“Mum’s making him,” Aisha admitted. “It’s not really something you can get down at the shops. ‘I’m sorry I was nasty to your pet’. He’s going to bring it round later and apologise.”

“Are they making him do that too?” said Beth, and Aisha hummed, a small affirmative sound.

“Try to be nice to him,” she said. “For me. He’s not a bad kid, you know that. And I know you don’t understand it, but he’s really scared of your dog.”

It was Beth who was silent then, who was caught between loyalties of her own. “I don’t think he’s the only one,” she said.

Beth lay in bed at night, her palms resting in fur. “I’m not scared of you,” she said. “My doggie, my doggie.” A doggie with fur that smelled of marzipan, that shaped beneath her fingers, that formed as she felt.

“I wish I could see you,” she said, but Beth would not see anything, not ever, and her eyes were in a body other than her own and they were not blind to her, or to anyone.

There was a long silence as Aisha considered. Beth held the Marzipan Dog steady beside her and under scrutiny, but the fur beneath her fingers was only fur, and the weight of his body against her was only warm, only soft and solid at once.

“He looks like a dog to me,” said Aisha. “He looks like what he’s always looked like.”

“You haven’t *felt* him,” said Beth. “Around other people, I mean. He *changes*. I’m telling you, he’s not a normal dog.”

“Beth,” said Aisha. “Beth. He doesn’t change. I can see him as well as I see you, and I can see him at school, and I see him when we go out, to the pool or the

beach or when we go dancing. And he might be wet or stinky or excited, but he's just a dog."

"You haven't felt him," said Beth again.

"Don't ask me to," said Aisha.

His tongue was warm and wet and forked, frigid and flickering and slicked with nectar. It smelled of meat and loyalty.

"I love you," said Beth. "My doggy, my doggy. *I love you.*"

The Marzipan Dog was growling: a deep, soft rumble that echoed. Beth felt it in her bones, felt the vibration through the harness, and when she knelt beside him to better hold him back, his shoulder had grown above hers and the fur beneath her fingers was coarser than it had ever been.

"Get behind me, Azmi," she heard Aisha say, and the sound of the little boy sobbing echoed as counterpart to the Marzipan Dog.

The dog was solid against her, solid and strong with muscles that made pillars of his legs and no matter

how much she pulled at him, Beth couldn't shift him, couldn't haul him away and into silence. "He's too big," she panted. "He's grown too much!"

"It's exactly the same size as it was yesterday," snapped Aisha. "It's just the same."

"I promise you he's not," said Beth. "He's different; I can feel it. I can't see it either, but other people can. They don't like him, Aish. He scares them."

"He's scaring Azmi," said Aisha, and she did not say anything about herself.

"Azmi's not seeing a Labrador," said Beth, and the choked wails coming from the corner of her bedroom convinced her that she was right. Beside her, the Marzipan Dog's growling altered, just slightly—an undertone of satisfaction, of pleasure and power and fear. "Az, when you threw stones at him, what did you see? What were you throwing stones at?"

"The bad thing," Azmi cried, and his voice was muffled, somehow, as if he was trying to stuff both fists into his mouth. "The bad dog thing!"

“There’s silver in my jewellery box,” said Beth.
“On the dressing table. That necklace you borrow sometimes. Take it out, give it to Az.”

“No,” said Aisha. “No. This has gone far enough.”
There was a long silence, broken only by the sound of crying, and Beth felt the floor vibrate beneath her knees, felt the Marzipan Dog shift against her slightly, as if something was coming towards them. Then his head dipped, just a little, as if someone had rested their hand on his head. The growling faltered, the echoes against Beth’s chest no longer constant, but broken, uncertain.

“You are just a dog,” said Aisha. “A spoilt, fat, grumpy dog. You’re not any bigger than you were before. You don’t feel any different. You don’t look any different.” The pressure lifted and the Marzipan Dog seemed to shift against Beth, to become softer, smaller, and the growl was lighter, almost a whining. And then it was gone.

“I’m taking my brother home,” said Aisha. Her voice was closer, louder, as if she had bent over to look the Marzipan Dog dead in the eye. “If that animal wants

to try and stop me, it can go ahead, but if it does I'll touch it again, and this time it won't be just a pat."

Beth dreamed of darkness and deserts. The ground beneath her feet was hard and gritty and there was sand in the air, abrading her skin. She was alone. She was always alone. In the distance she could hear whining, a faint thin little sound that echoed as if off dunes and empty spaces, but though she called and called the Marzipan Dog did not appear, and she was left to wander, powerless, without even her cane, and there was no-one to protect her.

"Hello?"

Beth had fallen asleep, curled around the Marzipan Dog, and her eyes itched and ached from crying. She'd woken to the vibration of her phone, clutched in one hand and half-pillowed under one cheek.

"Aisha? Is that you?"

There was a long silence, when all Beth could hear was the whuffle-snore of the Marzipan Dog. "I nearly

didn't call," said Aisha. "I've been so angry. And Azmi was so scared."

"I'm sorry," said Beth. "I'm so sorry. I know you don't believe me, but—"

"I believe you," said Aisha. "I know you're sorry. I'm sorry, too. That I didn't believe you about... about the other. I've been talking to Azmi, now he's calmed down a bit. He's a nuisance sometimes, but he's not a liar. Neither are you. If you say it's changing, that it's not a dog underneath, I believe you."

Tears pricked Beth's eyes, warm as blood. "Thanks," she said, sniffing, and turning over on the bed until her back was pressed up against the back of the Marzipan Dog, and she was facing away from him. "I can't explain it. I don't know why it's happening. I don't know why you can't see it."

"I think it's turning into the thing that frightens people most," said Aisha. "Not all the time. But if you're upset, or scared, well... it's your dog. It probably thinks it's protecting you. It knows it's supposed to help."

Beth snorted, and it was more watery than usual. "Some help," she said, and thought of spider legs and

leather-wings and scales. Of freedom and confidence and defence. “What about Azmi?” she said.

“Azmi sneak-watches too many horror films,” said Aisha. “He knows he’s not allowed. Serves him right.”

“What about you?” said Beth. “You said he’s never changed for you.”

“It never needed to,” said Aisha, and Beth remembered, suddenly, the shaking fist her friend had held out to the Marzipan Dog when they first met, the set tone, the careful distance she kept between them. Remembered, and remembered she had thought it mere revulsion, mere restriction.

“Aish,” she said. “*Aisha*. Why didn’t you say anything?”

“You’re my friend,” said Aisha. “My best friend. And you needed it. And I thought, I love you more than I was scared of it. And I don’t hate it any more, I suppose. I’ll never like it but I’m not afraid. So tell your beast if he werewolves out on my kid brother again, I’ll kick its fat arse. And I’ll *enjoy* it. Don’t think I won’t.”

Thump. Beth felt the bedspread shake, the rapid thrashing of tail. The Marzipan Dog was awake again,

and listening. She reached behind her, felt the warm, furred flank, the gentle nosing at her hand. *Thump, thump.*

“He hears you,” she said.

Beth lay in bed, the Marzipan Dog hard up against her and warm, friendly beneath her fingers. Protective. Beth cuddled up against him, into his big solid body and felt the heartbeat beneath the fur, the heart that had stood between her and hurt, between her and gossip and meanness and stones. She thought of Aisha, who had stood between as well, heard again the deep snarling growl of the Marzipan Dog as his new giant body had pulled the leash from her fingers—but this time, this time, she felt satisfaction as well as fear. “Not Aisha,” she said to the Marzipan Dog, into his fluffy, floppy Labrador ear. “And not Azmi, not ever again.” She thought of Aisha, and the pulling off of head scarves, and the bullying, and the boys calling her animal when Beth could not see to defend her. “But the rest of them,” said Beth, nuzzling deeper into the fur. “The rest of them, Marzipan, are fair game.”

And the Marzipan Dog shifted against her, the thud of his tail solid against the bedspread, and made a small happy growl like a purr in his throat.

--THE END--