

Charlie

Beautiful Geordie woman, “da killed in the mines”, she was “one of thirteen”, “dripping on bread, sometimes just dripping because they didn’t have the bread”. Those Geordies were made tough. I loved palliative care nursing and the stories the patients and families shared with me. She and I would muse together that if she had never gone to the doctors than she would never know that she was dying, and if she didn’t know she was dying than she wouldn’t die then would she? All her sentences were finishing in questions I had no answers to. Her eyes pleading for pardon as we sipped milky tea.

Her own family were “mad as cut snakes” she told me. Her sons didn’t speak to the daughters, and the daughters didn’t speak to each other. Carer daughter stoned and angry all the time. Red eyed and hostile. Beautician daughter perfect, flashing pinked nails and strappy sandals. UK daughter drunk from free whiskey on the plane and unaware of personal space. Adult grandchildren visited to pick up a loan from Nana before she “carks it”. And then there was the dog, Charlie.

The sign on the front gate did not do Charlie justice. “Authorised Personnel Only” “Beware of the dog” It did not say rabid mad dog that would rip your throat out if you made eye contact! I visited a few times a week and Charlie and I were never friends. I love dogs, but Charlie did not know he was a dog, and I think he probably knew my visits were a sign of life shifting in this sad old weatherboard home. My heart would lurch when I heard the back door for fear of Charlie breaking off his chain. I would always ring ahead to ensure Charlie was locked outside and I would still walk in nervously. I could not charm Charlie.

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When the time for her dying came, she wanted Charlie to be put down and be buried with her. She wanted me to tell her when. He was an old dog and would not manage being rehomed. The Vet was primed and sedation was on hand. The morning I told her it was time for Charlie to have his tablets, she nodded and closed her eyes. She did not have to worry about Charlie anymore. Charlie had his first tablet and started growling really loud. Charlie had a second tablet and he became more deranged, growling and chewing his chain. Her son gave him another two tablets and Charlie started lunging, threatening to pull the hills hoist over. The fifth and sixth tablet Charlie was walking albeit a bit wobbly. On the seventh tablet, Charlie was put in the bedroom and her family told me he was dead. My beautiful Geordie woman has sighed for the last time and I tended to her tenderly, navigating family's dysfunction at its god almighty best.

I packed up and went to take the supplies left in the bedroom – I stepped on Charlie who was laying in wait, not only was he not dead, he had not mellowed and he was not sulking in the dark. He came out fighting and latched on to my ankle – I reacted and swung my leg away, throwing Charlie across the room and against the wall. I gaped in horror as Charlie shook his head, refocused and came at me again – I ran out the door and slammed it shut only to hear him hit the door at full speed. They make those Geordies tough.