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David Bolt

The Silent Treatment

Sue had not long been out of hospital, but was, as she put it, already climbing the walls. The plan was that I would walk the mile or so to her flat and then the two of us would go to her local for something to eat. As I left my house, however, it started to rain, so I decided to catch the bus. This was not a problem because the stop was within throwing distance and the Number 17 was just about due. The only real consequence of this change of plan was that I ended up knocking on Sue's door about half-an-hour early.

Smelling of toothpaste and shampoo, she invited me through to the kitchen with a hug and a voice that revealed pleasure and a hint of irritation, but the latter disappeared by the time she gave me a mug of fresh coffee with which to occupy myself.

"Right, Egg," she said, settling in front of the mirror, "I know you've not walked down here, you're too early and the dog is too dry, so I hope you've a taxi story to tell."

"Hey, come on," I said. "I was going to walk, but the weather changed my mind at the last minute and convinced me to catch the bus."

"Never mind all that," she said, "bus story, let's hear it."

"Bus story," I said dryly.

"Egg," she said.

"Mmmm," I said, "now let me think, do I have a bus story?"

"Don't tease me," she said, slowly unzipping her make-up bag, "remember I have just had a major operation."

"Alright," I said, "are you sitting comfortably?"

"Very funny," she said. "Now get on with it."

"Well," I said, "then I'll begin."

I drank the last of my coffee in hope that I would be offered another cup, but Sue just carried on in the mirror, probably under the misapprehension that I was attempting a dramatic pause.

"Well," I said, "I was barely past my front gate when Dai met this woman who wanted or as you would say needed to talk.

"Aren't you a lovely dog," she said. "Just look at the size of your paws. They're enormous. Have you had her long?"

"The fact that she raised her head confirmed that it was at me that the last sentence was aimed, so I smiled and began to answer.

"Just over..." was about all I managed before she interrupted.

"She is a she, isn't she?"

"Err, no," I said.

“I think these dogs are amazing,’ she said, ‘absolutely amazing. I’ve seen them being trained down in Leamington Spa. Just amazing.’

“‘Right,’ I said.”

Dai was trained in Leamington Spa, but to share this information with the stranger would have been nothing short of encouragement. It would have delayed me unnecessarily as I endeavoured to complete a sentence to the dreaded sound of my bus passing by.

“While rummaging in her bag, the woman began talking in a voice that in my view would have been best reserved for conversations with toddlers, or better still, babies.

“‘I’ve got a little treat for you in here somewhere,’ she said.

“‘Oh, sorry,’ I said, ‘he’s not allowed titbits.’

“‘No,’ she said, ‘of course not, but these are special dog biscuits. Now where are they?’

“‘Err, yeah,’ I said, ‘but he’s still not...’ and she interrupted me again.

“‘You deserve a little treat after taking care of your master all day, don’t you little girl?’”

“I suppose he had something to say to that,” said Sue.

“‘Afraid so,’ I said.

Sue was alluding to the fact that Dai is an unusual dog in so far as he gets so carried away with saying so much to so many people that he sometimes starts to talk. Thus, despite the fact that it was only eleven in the morning, that the days only care-taking had involved me feeding Dai, grooming Dai and disposing of Dai’s excrement, my intended retort was undermined by what could have been mistaken for the voice of a cartoon character.

“‘Yeahyeahyeah,’ said Dai. ‘Definitely deserve dog biscuits. Wantwant now. Givegive now.’

“‘Oh isn’t that nice,’ said the woman, evidently unperturbed by anthropomorphism, ‘they’ve taught you how to talk as well as everything else. There you go little girl.’

“I gave a quick yank of the lead.

“‘No,’ I said.

“‘Oh, don’t hurt her,’ she said. ‘Is the nasty master cruel to his good little girl?’

“‘Nonono,’ said Dai. ‘Notnot girl. Gotgot dick. In fact, before chosen to be Guide Dog, had two of biggest bollocks could ever imagine.’”

“‘He didn’t,’” said Sue, laughing and momentarily shifting her gaze from the mirror.

“‘Afraid so,’ I said.

Dai has developed an attitude about gender for two reasons. Firstly, the name Dai is often interpreted as Di, because when spoken they sound the same. Secondly, his long hair elicits many references to beauty, a quality that is usually perceived as feminine.

“‘Well,’ said the woman, ‘you certainly did not learn language like that in Warwickshire.’

“‘Great bigbig dog bollocks,’ said Dai. ‘Had to pull em out of me ear holes, were that bigbig.’

“‘Now you be quiet and find the bus stop,’ I said as the woman finally let us pass.

“‘Want more,’ said Dai. ‘Give more dogdog biscuits.’

“I heard the bus approaching the stop and began to run.

“‘Come on, come on, come on,’ I said, ‘find the stop’ and made it just in time for the doors to open in front of me.

“‘Are you going to Hanley mate,’ I shouted above the rumble of the engine, expecting one of the two usual drivers - both of whom are men - and was surprised to hear a woman’s voice.

“‘No,’ she said, ‘Newcastle. Hanley’s running late.’

“‘Oh, okay,’ I said, ‘thanks.’

“The bus pulled away, but another arrived almost immediately.

“‘Go on boy,’ I said to Dai, ‘find the steps.’

“Again the doors opened before me and again I shouted to the driver.

“‘Is this the Hanley bus?’

“‘Yeah,’ he said, ‘Hanley.’

“‘There you go,’ I said, climbing aboard and showing my pass. ‘Will you give me a shout when we get to Basford, opposite The Queen’s?’

“‘What a lovely dog,’ he said - it wasn’t one of the usual drivers. ‘The Queen’s?’

“‘Please,’ I said.

“‘No problem,’ he said, ‘I’ll give you a shout.’

“I’m sure he meant well, but by keeping the bus at a standstill, he emphasised what turned out to be a far from slick search for somewhere to sit.

“‘Come on boy,’ I more or less whispered to Dai, ‘find a seat,’ and walked halfway down the bus without anyone saying a word.”

Sue appreciated this scenario, for she has witnessed many instances in which silence has been disabling to me.

“‘Mmm,’ she said, “the silent treatment of the blind?”

“‘People with impaired vision,’ I said, “if you don’t mind.”

“‘I was being ironic,” she said.

“‘So was I,” I said and we both laughed.

Having given up the hope of more coffee, I put my cup in the sink before continuing the story.

“‘Anyway, ‘good boy,’ I said, when Dai stopped, hoping it was for an empty seat and not for someone with a packet of chewing gum or crisps or nuts or pork scratchings or sandwiches or special dog biscuits, a hope that was dashed when I touched someone’s coat.

“‘Sorry,’ I said.

“‘There’s an empty one in front of you on the right,’ said a woman who was seated near to the person on whom I nearly sat.

“Thanks,’ I said.

“Oh, sorry, on your left,’ she said, as I touched another coat and another of the silent passengers began to panic.

“Thanks,’ I said when I sat down and the bus finally began to move.

“Ah,’ said another woman, ‘isn’t that dog gorgeous. Can I stroke him?’

“Yeah,’ I said.

“Only I know you’re not meant to make a fuss of a Blind Dog,’ she said.

“I thought Dai would have some crack to make about Guide People or something, but he remained silent.

“I don’t mind,’ I said, ‘as long as you don’t feed him.’

“I saw it on the telly,’ she said.

“Right,’ I said, ‘well, I don’t mind as long as he’s not working.’

“Mind you,’ she added after a pause, ‘when you come to think about it, it can’t be much of a life for him. Does he ever have a run?’

“Yeah,’ I said.

“Off the lead,’ she asked.

“Yeah,’ I said, trying not to laugh as I imagined myself hanging on to the lead and flying through the air as Dai ran after whatever I’d thrown for him.

“The bus stopped and a number of people climbed aboard.

“What a lovely dog,’ said one woman as she sat in one of the empty seats that I had passed.

“He’s gorgeous,’ said another woman as she sat in another of the empty seats that I had passed.

“Why don’t you get a big one next time?’ asked a man as he squeezed past before ostentatiously brushing stray dog hair from his trousers and getting his arse sniffed in the process.”

“He can smell my dog,” said Sue in what was meant to be a man’s voice.

“Well, Mister,” I said, “I don’t know what you’ve been doing with your dog” and again we both laughed.

“Any more?” said Sue, spraying something that added yet another smell to the mix.

“Well,” I said, “as you might imagine, conversations about dogs began up and down the bus and continued until the next stop. One man explained that his sister’s friend had a Guide Dog, another, that he had an Alsatian himself, but that he would never take it on a bus, and another, that the long-haired variety are in fact called German Shepherd Dogs.”

“I thought Alsatis and German Shepherds were one and the same,” said Sue with an upside down voice, which indicated that her hair was now in straighteners and that she would soon be done.

“So did I,” I said.

“I’m sure I can remember reading that somewhere,” she said.

“Anyway,” I said, “as the bus slowed down, I heard a man at the front, speaking to the driver in a lowered voice.

“‘Morten House,’ he said.

“Ignored by the driver, the man persisted.

“‘Morten House. I think the gentleman with the dog usually gets off here.’

“‘Not today,’ said the driver in a voice that was quiet but revealed much annoyance.

“After being stationary for a moment the bus let out a sigh on my behalf and began to move again.

“‘Excuse me driver,’ shouted an irate woman from right at the back of the bus, ‘excuse me, I think the blind man wants to get off.’

“‘I know where he wants to get off,’ shouted the bus driver, who sounded capable of murder at a moment’s notice.”

“So,” said Sue, turning to look at me, “you were sat in the middle while this woman and driver were arguing from either end of the bus?”

“Exactly,” I said.

“What did you do?” said Sue.

“Nowt,” I said, “I just sat there, pretending I couldn’t hear.”