

Lassie

Tom was contented with life, or as contented as a ten-year-old boy could be, until his older sister got a boyfriend. Jason was nineteen and an alien creature to Tom; he stank of aftershave and was always checking his reflection – in the dark windows before the curtains were drawn against the night, in the gleaming microwave door, even in the distorting curves of a spoon. He worked as a night cashier at the petrol station down the road and sometimes he came over for dinner before his night shift started. Jason and Michelle constantly exchanged looks and codewords that Tom couldn't fathom, but they didn't interest him either. Michelle was nice as far as older sisters went. He'd heard horror stories from friends about older siblings who went out of their way to humiliate and torment them, but Michelle was too interested in the state of her face and how big her bum looked to bother Tom. He hoped his sister would get a different boyfriend soon; meanwhile, he suffered Jason's company.

‘Got a girlfriend yet, Tom?’

He concentrated on cutting his remaining fish fingers into four pieces. His mum was at her Pilates class and his dad was on a late shift, which meant Jason had free rein.

‘I’ll take it that’s a no, then.’

Tom stuck his fork into a piece of fish finger, dunked it into a dollop of ketchup, and began chewing. He was determined not to look at Jason. If he looked at him he was a goner. Jason could probably fire laser beams out of his eyes that would frazzle Tom in seconds.

‘What’s the matter, don’t the girls like you?’ Jason laughed softly to himself, leaning back, so his chair was on its back legs. ‘When I was your age I had them hanging off me.’

Two fishfingers eaten, two to go. And he’d eaten most of his chips and peas already. Dinner couldn’t last much longer.

‘Jase, Tom’s only ten,’ said his Michelle.

‘And? He’s not going to interest the girls looking like that. When did you last wash your hair, mate? Bet they call you Greaseball behind your back.’

Michelle stood up, screeching her chair across the kitchen tiles. ‘Coming?’ she said to Jason. ‘Your shift starts in an hour.’

‘Yeah.’ Jason stood up. ‘See you later, Greaseball.’

‘Wash up will you, Tom?’ his sister called from the bottom stair, Jason’s fingers wedged in her back pockets. ‘And don’t disturb us.’

When Tom’s parents were around, Jason was nice as pie. He helped his mum wash and dry the plates and made ingratiating small talk about work and football with his dad. But when they weren’t there, Jason was on at Tom again.

‘You won’t get a girlfriend with a face like that,’ said Jason. ‘You want to wash it more often. Wash some of those spots away.’

Tom felt himself flush. The spots were a new thing. They’d sprung up in the last couple of months and were appearing in the worst possible places – the end of his nose, the middle of his chin, right between his eyes.

Michelle spoke up for him. ‘It’s not dirt, it’s hormones,’ she said.

‘Looks like dirt to me.’

‘Leave him alone.’

After dinner, Tom went up to his room. He had a sloping wooden desk with a clip-on lamp where he did his homework, and a wooden chair that was so uncomfortable he often ended up sprawling on his bed. Tonight he had physics homework. *What is gravity?* he had written at the top of the page. He chewed his pencil. The rubber was gone and he liked biting on the metal end, pinching it together.

There was a loud knock and his bedroom door opened. When he saw it was Jason, Tom turned back to his work, his heart racing slightly. What did he *want*? Why couldn't he just stay in Michelle's room and snog until he had to start his shift at the petrol station?

'This your room, then?'

'Duh.' Tom said it almost silently, but Jason came over and snatched his exercise book away.

'You want to mind how you speak to your elders, young Thomas. Show some respect.' As he spoke, he spat slightly over Tom's work. Then he left, leaving the door wide open.

Tom got up and closed it, his hands trembling. He tore out the page that Jason had spat on and started again, writing again at the top of the fresh page *What is gravity?* He'd get in trouble at school if the teacher saw the ragged edge of the missing page; teachers were strict about the stupidest things, but a telling off was better than having Jason's spit on his stuff. *Gravity is a force*, he wrote. Mrs Baker would probably want more than that. *Gravity pulls things to the ground.*

A few weeks later it was Tom's eleventh birthday. He already knew he was getting a budgie. When his mum had first suggested it he hadn't been keen. He didn't know anyone who had a bird except Irene, a tiny ancient woman who lived up the road and never left her house. He'd gone with his mum to visit her a few times. Irene had made them a cup of tea but then she'd talked to her bird for the rest of the visit, like they hadn't been there. *Poor old soul*, his mum had said afterwards.

Tom had asked if he could have a dog, but he'd already known the answer. His father was always banging on about dog mess in the street and how disgusting people were, keeping

animals in their houses. It would be a bird or nothing so he'd said yes to a budgie, but in a disinterested sort of way.

On his birthday he went with his mum to Pets & Pals, the pet shop on the high street. He chose a pale blue budgie that had black and white stripes on its head and wings. His mum bought a load of other stuff too – a cage, some little bowls for seed, a water dispenser and a few toys, including a perch and a plastic mirror like Michelle's dolls had when she was younger. Tom decided to call the bird Lassie: it was a friendly sort of name and the bird seemed to have a friendly expression.

For the first couple of days Lassie sat on his perch and didn't move. He looked a bit sad but Tom's mum said he was just getting used to everything. She got a book out of the library about caring for budgies and Tom read that it was okay for the bird to be quiet at first. He felt relieved, he'd been worried that Lassie didn't like him.

It took a bit of getting used to, having a living creature in his bedroom. When he woke up in the morning, he could hear Lassie moving around, drinking water or preening his feathers. Tom read that it was important to talk to your bird because they're naturally social but he wasn't sure what to talk about. He began by explaining what everything was in his room.

'Lassie, this is my bed, and this is my wardrobe – you might like to perch up there sometimes. This is my bed, where I sleep, and my desk and bookcase. These are my books – this one's my favourite.' He held up *Tom's Midnight Garden*. 'It's got the same name as me, I'm Tom, too. Or maybe this one, actually.' He grabbed *Skellig*. 'Well, they're both good. I can read them to you sometime, if you want?'

The bird cheeped, which Tom took for assent.

He read about how to get Lassie to trust him. After two days, Tom put his hand in the cage. He didn't try to touch Lassie, didn't even wiggle his fingers. He just put his hand there,

letting the bird get use to him. At first Lassie was a bit agitated, but after Tom had done it a few times he didn't seem bothered. Then Tom started to push his hand gently against Lassie's front. The book said that this would encourage Lassie to climb on his fingers, and it worked. He loved the feel of Lassie's little claws curled around his finger. He hardly weighed anything so it didn't make his arm ache. Not like the time he'd held a barn owl at a bird display a couple of years ago. He'd been too embarrassed to say the bird was too heavy and his arm had hurt for days.

Tom tried feeding Lassie from his fingers. He dipped them in water and put millet grains on them. The water made the grains stick. He put his hand near Lassie and he pecked at them. Tom was pleased – it meant Lassie was used to him now. He was surprised how much mess the bird made. His mum helped him sweep out the droppings at first – *you think this is bad, have two kids*, she'd laughed – but before long he could do everything on his own. And he wanted to: he felt protective of the little bird. He cleaned the cage thoroughly once a week with bird-safe disinfectant, and gave Lassie a cuttlebone. Soon he could reach in and gently bring Lassie out of the cage. He let Lassie fly around his room for an hour when he came home from school. He kept him in his bedroom, but as an extra precaution he made sure all the windows in the house were closed too. Lassie would fly around and then perch on the curtain rail. Sometimes he'd sit on Tom's head or shoulder and tweak his ear. Michelle liked Lassie too. Tom let her sit on his bed (but only if Jason wasn't there) and they'd try to get Lassie to sit on her hand and peck at a few millet grains. Tom liked spending time with his sister, it reminded him of when they were younger and she'd let him come to the beach with her and her friends, or they'd make fairy cakes together in the kitchen, their mum going mad about the mess.

Soon after he got Lassie, Tom did a project for school about birds and gravity. He described how they beat their wings to create thrust and stay up in the air, He got an A+ for

it. His mum gave him an extra pound with his pocket money and he used it to buy Lassie a plastic blue bath that hooked on to the side of the cage.

Some budgies imitate human speech, but Lassie only ever cheeped. Despite this, Tom became convinced Lassie understood every word he was saying. He had such bright, intelligent eyes, and he tilted his head like a person does to show you they're really listening. Tom told Lassie everything he couldn't tell anyone else and Lassie took it all in. He told him about school, how the teachers were always grumpy. He told him he was scared of starting at the big school in the autumn, where Michelle was in the sixth form, and came home full of stories of what the older boys did to first years. He told him about how he didn't like Jason, and didn't think Jason was nice to Michelle either. He'd seen her with red eyes from crying sometimes. It felt good to talk to Lassie and Tom felt he understood Irene a little better. Budgies were good company.

'I can't believe you've got a budgie called Lassie! Are you stupid or something?'

Jason had barged into his room, demanding to see the bird, but Tom had already covered Lassie's cage for the night and refused to wake him.

Tom looked at him, uncomprehending.

'It's a *dog*'s name,' said Jason.

'I'm not allowed a dog,' said Tom.

'So what? Be a rebel. Get one anyway. Once you've got one, what're they gonna do?'

Tom knew what his parents would do. They'd shout at him and take the dog to a rescue centre and Tom would get no pocket money for a year.

'Jase!' his sister called from her room. 'What are you doing?'

'Having a heart-to-heart with your little bro.'

She appeared in the doorway and put her hands on each side of the door frame. Her lower lip pouted out sulkily. Tom had seen her practising that expression in the mirror, so he supposed she knew how daft she looked.

‘Come and see *meee*,’ she whined.

Jason gave her a foul look. ‘Don’t tell me what to do.’ But he turned away from Tom and followed Michelle to her room.

Jason quit his job at the petrol station and started doing labouring. He still came over for dinner quite often, but now he stayed later. One night, when Tom went back into his room after brushing his teeth, Jason was there. Lassie’s cloth had been removed and he was cheeping crossly. Tom felt a white anger go through him. It shocked him, he’d never felt so much hatred before.

‘What are you doing?’ he asked Jason, as calmly as he could. He picked up the cloth from the floor and draped it back over Lassie’s cage. ‘Don’t bother Lassie, he’s gone to bed.’

‘Like all good boys and girls,’ said Jason in a sing-song voice.

Tom stood there, self-conscious in his pyjamas, waiting for Jason to leave. Jason sat on the bed. He smiled at Tom and patted the bed beside him. Tom didn’t sit down.

‘You know it’s cruel to keep birds locked away. Lassie wants to be free.’

‘He doesn’t. He likes living with me.’

‘Lassie’s a bird, Tom. He likes to fly and be with other birds like him. Look how small his cage is.’

‘I let him out every day.’ Tom started to shiver; he wished he could get into bed.

‘That’s not enough. Lassie wants to fly with his friends and perch in trees, not sit in his cage listening to boring stories all the time. *Mr Tom and His Secret Garden* or whatever.’

‘Have you been listening to me read?’ Tom was aghast.

Jason stood up and ruffled Tom's hair. 'Think about it, Tom old pal. You should do what's right.'

Tom shut his bedroom door and looked at the covered-over cage. It was quite small for a bird. He wouldn't like being kept in a cage all day, only let out for an hour each evening. And even then, it was only Tom's bedroom that Lassie was allowed to explore.

Tom went to bed and pulled the duvet up over his ears. All night he dreamed of birds – birds caught in tiny cages, birds crashing at windows, panicking and trying to escape. He dreamed of birds tied up, birds neglected and forgotten, birds dying of thirst and starvation. The final dream was of his own bird. He dreamed that Lassie's bright beady eyes went dull and then he fell to the bottom of his cage.

Tom woke up. The water pipes gurgled and the radiator ticked as it cooled. He got out of bed and opened the curtains. The streetlights cast their orange glow over the empty street. All the curtains were drawn on the houses opposite, like they had their eyes closed and were sleeping too. He opened the window wide and breathed the cold night air. He could smell the garden, a damp earth smell mixed with pollen and pine needles. If he was a bird, he'd want to be out there, building a nest and flying up into the sky with no ceiling or closed windows to stop him.

He took the cloth off Lassie's cage and Lassie gave a small surprised cheep. Tom opened the cage door and reached in, cupping him in his fist. Then, his heart aching, he carried Lassie to the open window and opened his hand. Before he could release the bird, another hand closed over his, and gently took Lassie from him.

'Tom,' said his sister. 'Close the window and get into bed. It's cold.'

He did as she said, while she put Lassie back in his cage and draped the cloth over it. Then she got into bed beside him, like they used to do when they were younger, and she held him tight until he stopped shivering.