



**6 or 2 3s**  
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**Part 1**  
**Donkey, Dead, Imagine**

We are sitting in a kafeneion - a traditional Greek cafe where only men are allowed and where card playing and gossip are the pastimes and tiny Greek coffees served hot and sweet and with an exact amount of froth are the order... .

There are 3 old men at the table next to us: if we glance to our right we can see them in profile. They are sitting at the back of the kafeneion in a corner: this way nobody can enter or leave without them seeing. They are all old. They are probably in their eighties and a life in the open air has ravaged their skins which are tawny and wrinkled - more like some form of leather than human skin. Their leathery faces are punctuated with wrinkles around the mouths and eyes and they look like laughter lines although all three have mildly disapproving countenances.

One old man is smoking a cigarette - untipped and in front of him on the zinc topped table lies a packet of Sante, not one of the new fangled flip-top packet but something more akin to an open box- timeless like the old man himself with his white hair and moustaches. There is tinge of tobacco yellow at the margin of his handsome handlebar moustache but he is otherwise spotless. His clothes are old and have faded in the punishing sun but they are spotless as is he. Doubtless a handsome fellow in his youth. he still has the erect posture of a man of some importance. He has the penetrating light blue eyes of a man whose family hail from Sfakia.

The Sante box lies open on the table, its lid propped against his water glass. Red and gaping, there is a picture of a blonde Greek woman sporting a marcel wave and a red slash for a mouth on it lid. The cigarettes are untipped and a small amount of dark brown tobacco dust lies in the bed of the open box dislodged in its constant travels to and from his shirt pocket that clearly bears the faded silhouette of the box. A cheap blue Bic lighter advertising some bar or other in Xania sits beside the cigarette box nestling between it and the battered aluminium ashtray, its own advertising slogan long ago washed away, in which he is accumulating a pile of short, dangerously short butts and a separate pile of ash. In places the metal of the ashtray has worn thin with years of wear. He has clearly been here since dawn for it is still very early and the sun is yet low in the sky to their left. The sky is cloudless and threatens an intense heat later.

The road that passes by the kafeneion leads from the village on their right up to the mountain pasture to their left where the sun has recently risen. They can sit here all day and watch everything that happens. Nothing can escape these Cretans' gaze. The road is white with dust and away in the distance up where the village ends, there is a small cloud just forming in the dust. It is small and far enough away that it is

impossible to make out what it is. The man with the pale blue eyes looks at us and motions with an upward tilt of his head toward the growing cloud - "Pavlos einai!" The man opposite him nods, his grey beard crumbed with rusk, "Ne, kai Dimitri!". The third man laughs and looks up from his komboloi for the first time. He has been playing with these beads since we first entered the kafeneion in an intricate one handed dance routine, their amber clacking gently in the background with only the occasional loud click as his wrist describes an exaggerated arc and he executes a backhand manoeuvre. He nods to the smoker, who has since lit another cigarette while his last one expires busily in the aluminium ashtray. "Dimitri defteros!".

The pair slowly work their way closer until: the smoker coughs and declaims in a strong baritone voice : "Gia sas kyrie Pavlos". The man with the donkey now looks up from his feet and we can see that he is a small man with a pronounced hump on his back. He is as old as any of our three cronies but in his dark eyes there is an intelligent and knowing glint that speaks of a life well lived and a life that continues. This man is of the land. As resolute and unbending as the stones that pock the landscape. As prickly and dangerous as the thorny bushes that cover the lower slopes of this mountain until they peter out far above the village where the olives stop and the final stand of cypresses announce wilderness. he wears the heavy twill breeches of old Crete, greyed and scuffed and dusty, tucked into the high leather boots that he has owned since before he married 50 years ago. His wife is in the cemetery that he will pass in 2 or 3 kilometres on the left, laid there years ago leaving him to carry on alone. Leaving him to carry the burden of life in the mountain village where both of them were born all those years ago. When first she died he felt betrayed but over the intervening years he has learned again the pleasures of a solitary life - a life like a hermit of old. His health is good and his back is strong - he can think of no good reason to join her lying in the sun baked sod of the family plot. The boots are black with a high shine showing through the layers of dust. he polishes these boots every night last thing before bed just as he learned to do in the army all those years ago. His shirt, which is denim, would fetch a tidy sum in the boutiques of London where faded and pre-worn clothes command a premium. His sleeves are rolled roughly back behind his gnarled elbows and the tendons and muscles of his forearms remind one of the Popeye of childhood cartoons. "Gia sas" he shouts back. His head drops again and he pulls gently on the rope in his left hand to encourage the

donkey's awkward gait on past the kafeneion and up the slope that rises before them. And now we can only see the back of this strong, proud man and the parting buttocks of his weary old donkey swaying. In the time it took them to pass the time of day the dust has settled and the cicadas have started their daily festival of noise behind the kafeneion. Their incessant, rasping chattering will continue until well after the sun has departed the day and often it will be the only noise. .

The owner of the kafeneion has joined us and sits with her back to the three old men. She is a small old lady, frail like a bird and pale. There are liver spots on her forearms and what might be a melanoma on her cheek just below her right eye. She is dressed in black with a black headscarf that is clearly of a newer vintage than the shapeless dress she wears pulled tightly in at the waist covering her wispy white hair. She has brought another pair of Greek coffees and a small plate with a bunch of grapes. She puts the thin tin tray down on the chair beside us and sits herself down. Silence ensues. Astonishingly, she begins to speak in English, faltering at first but slowly gaining confidence and clarity. Barely a whisper it is clear that she does not want to be overheard. "That fine old man who just went by? That was Pavlo. And Dimitri, his donkey. But it was Dimitri the old - not Dimitri the second. Pavlo has always had a donkey called Dimitri - ever since he was old enough to care for one. At school he had a donkey called Dimitri. Sometimes he would ride me home from school when we were young. Before he got mixed up with Anna. Now he has two donkeys called Dimitri and that's what those clowns were talking about. Laughing at him, and them not fit to clean his boots. Did you see his boots? Shining like new. Better than new. My husband Georgo asked him if could he have those boots when he dies, but Georgos died first, god rest his soul. Last year it was, around Pascha - the cancer you know. And now he's lying up there in the cemetery not 5 metres from Pavlo's Anna. Pavlo has two donkeys now because the old donkey, Dimitri the first, is ... well, old. He's not long for this mortal coil. The donkey that is, not Pavlo, he'll go on forever I think. He's gone up there to talk to Anna and then he'll go on and collect some xorta and he'll sit up there and just look around. A man that old has so many memories he doesn't need anyone anymore. Just him and his donkey - donkeys." She levers herself up out of the chair, picks up her tray and shuffles back behind the counter where she stands, elbows on the counter and her head rested in her hands, staring out through the peeling doors. Craning a little to the right she can just make out the departing forms of Pavlos and Dimitri to the left. One could almost fancy that she has been carrying

a torch for this man since they were at school together and he rode her home on his beloved donkey.

We are looking at the front of the kafeneion from the bank opposite. Slightly elevated, we look down on and across the dusty road that has no pavements but just leaks into the front doors of the kafeneion which were once dark green, for Pasok, but are now sun blistered and peeling. One of the panes in the left hand door is cracked all the way across about a third of the way up. The glass is reflecting our own images back at us it is so covered with dust. Our bottom halves are offset a little by the crack and the image we can see is a duotone. The sun is directly behind us and its glare hurts the eyes even in reflection. There is a heat haze rising from the dusty road in front of us and just to our left on the other side of the road the owner is desultorily pushing an old fashioned broom back and forth in front of two old olive oil tins each of which contains a fine yucca plant behind her is a small shrine.

The light is so bright that everything looks washed out, almost hazy. Our mouths are dry and full of dust: our tongues leathery and harsh on the inside of our cheeks. Our noses are caked inside with the same dust that lies everywhere, covering everything with its pale shroud. Inside, only the smoker remains. We hear footfalls to our right and glance up to see Pavlo striding this way like a young man, head held high, back straight. He raises a small cloud as he passes, looking neither to the left nor to the right. From behind, for he has passed in a trice, he could be taken for a thirty year old. As he passed, we noticed that his breeches were held up by a green webbing belt with a dingy brass buckle. The breeches have no belt loops and so the belt is just cinched in under the waistband. We must have been looking at his boots last time not to have noticed the belt.

We cross the road and sit down at one of the outside tables where there is a little shade from a mulberry tree on the bank across the road that has been shaped over the years into an elaborate fan. A little respite from the punishing sun. The possibly lovesick proprietress takes our order for Gazoza and disappears inside where she disappears once more into a vast, pale green american fridge almost twice her height where she keeps the Gazoza good and cold. Gazoza from Vrysses. She brings the Gazoza and two frosted glasses, setting them down in front of us before whispering, almost stage whispering, "Something is not right. Mark my words." And she is gone. Our table has a copy of the battered aluminium ashtray that the smoker is trying to fill inside and we decide to give it a try. The heat is overpowering and the dryness is harsh. The urge to close

one's eyes is strong and we submit for a while drifting in the shimmer between waking and sleep. The gazoza is warm now and rings of condensation dribble away from the bases of or thick, pebble like glasses spilling from the galvanized table top into puddles in the dust. Dust settles onto the puddles, iridescent. More footfalls, this time to the right. Another cloud of dust, and in less than half the time it took him this morning Pavlo is past again. Striding back up the incline and carrying what looks like an axe and a saw at his belt and a mattock over his shoulder. We smoke some more, finish our warm Gazozas, and head home for a siesta.

It is evening, the sun has sunk behind the mountains at the back of the village but the cicadas continue their maddening racket. The air has barely cooled. It is hot and dry and there is, once more no breeze. Dust coats all four tables outside the kafeneion where we sit. Looking across at the mulberry we notice that its glossy leaves are coated in the same dust, the dark green foliage beginning to mirror the dusty, peeling paint of this kafeneion. The sky is purple and heavy, a bank of cloud above the village showing fringes of pink where sun has set behind it. The heat is remorseless and draining, seeming to rise from the road and just hang there taunting. "I told you there was something not right." It is the owner. Somehow she has crept up on us without us being aware of her. "Katsei, sit, please". She does. Tell us what happened. In a single movement she is up and moving. She shuffles off inside and brings a bottle and three small shot glasses. Sikourthia. "We need a little raki for this" she says and settles herself back down amazingly elegantly for an old lady. I pour three glasses and we wait. "Si gia" she says throwing the raki back in one bite and pouring three more. "I told you. Didn't I?". This must be serious. Cretan ladies seldom drink raki and less seldom still do they swig it back. "Yes you did. So, what was it?"

She drank another raki, banging the glass down with a "Gia mas" before drinking it off in one swallow again.

"So there was Pavlo, all alone up in the gorge with a dead donkey and nobody likely to come by for days and the buzzards circling and his dear dear donkey still warm. Well, he dragged him up onto the bank and talked to him a while while he was working out what to do. You know, what a good friend he'd been to him and how he'd see that the buzzards didn't get him. And all the time Pavlo was wondering what to do. Around midday he had decided, but first he had to come back to the village to get some things... ."

"And that's when we saw him"

"Exactly - he covered poor Dimitri as best he could with some scrub and came back here as fat as he could. He said that he owed that Dimitri after all they had been through together."

"The mattock I can understand but the axe? And the pruning saw?"

"You're not familiar with the gorge then. The gorge is rock formation. Most places up there the soil is no more than 10 centimetres deep. There are gaps between the rocks but no real earth."

We watch until the sun has started to slide below the crest and Pavlo has finished his task. Bathed in sweat and covered in blood he casts the axe and the saw into the final hole before filling it in and stamping it down. He stands and says a silent prayer, looking up at the gerakia all the while. Finally, he stumbles to the edge of the stream and kneels to wash his hands and face in the trickle of mountain water that dribbles past. He washes the mattock, head and shaft, and hefts it onto his shoulder. Weary now and crying, we know not whether from sadness, exhaustion or exultation at his job completed he wanders across to a spot we haven't spied before - this must be where the head is buried. He kneels and closes his eyes, the tears still coursing down his battered, weather beaten cheeks and thus he stays in contemplation, who knows, in communication, for some several minutes. He walks, his head bowed, past us and out of the gorge. The mattock is across his shoulders now, his arms hooked over its shaft. He walks away from us into the gathering dark.

**Part 2**  
**Hey Lady**

Hey Lady, (after Christopher Logue)

Hey, lady.

Yes you.

Do you remember last week

when you said that henceforward we should just be civil to each other?

You remember,

you said it like it had been rehearsed,

which I assume it was.

Just before you stormed off around the corner yelling,

"You're the most selfish person I've ever met".

Yes,

you do remember,

it was the day after you were so ill,

with a back so bad that you couldn't walk the ten metres to our house

to invite us to dinner.

That's right,

the very next day, when you walked sprightly that same ten metres

to show us your new door knocker.

The same day you let slip that we were only invited to dinner

so that we could admire your new furniture.

That's the one.

The day before you started to ignore me

and rush back into your house whenever you came out

and saw me.

Hoping I hadn't seen you.

I saw you.

So, lady, when does it start?

This being civil?

Don't walk away lady.

Hey, lady

**Part 3**  
**IRIS AND STANLEY - AND BOBBY**  
**TOO**

It is, in the Kotsolakis household, a custom long established and, save for illness, inviolate, that Nikos gets the first hour of the day to himself. It works in Germany and it works here in Kournas, his family village. His mother was born here and he was raised here until he was 6: when he suddenly found himself in Germany. The job that his father went to do in Germany for BASF is finished now and so is his father. Dead these past 4 years. He is not buried in the church here in the village. He is buried in his father's village, up in the mountains on the way to Sfakion. This house is built on land that his mother brought to the marriage. A plot on what used to be nothing, fields, but that is now just inside the village boundary. The road that runs past the end of the drive leads left into the village and right out to the lake. When he was a child he would come this way only to help his grandfather with the olives in November or December. Now he lives here with his family from July until September. It is a good place. It is good that he gets the first hour of the day to himself. he sits on the terrace and looks down toward the sea, across the valleys to Kavros.

It is early but not so early that the shepherds have not taken their flocks past. He smiles to himself as he recalls how, as a child he would get up before the sun in the summers so that he could take the flock out with Antonis. His beloved Antonis. His best friend in those days of long dry summers. Adonis, who taught him how to smoke. Summers that seemed never to end. Nowadays, his two months here seems to pass in the twinkling of an eye. He leans back in the chair and sips from his coffee. He lights another Assos and thinks of his cardiologist in Munich who keeps telling him he should give it up. But if a man has no pleasures in life why would he continue to live? The sun is well up now and the heat, gentle twenty minutes ago but growing in intensity by the minute now warms his old bones through as he watches a shepherd move his flock over toward the lake. He passed the house some time ago and is clearly in no hurry. Why would he rush on such a day? He has all day. Nikos is, in contrast, very much aware of how little time he might have left. Time goes by so quickly in Germany with its rush and bustle. The endless business of business. There is always something to attend to there, while here there is just ... Just the being.

He leans forward again and empties the ashtray over the wall. It wouldn't do to let Maria and Sofia see how much he has smoked. Without thinking, he reaches the red and white pack across and lights another. They will be about soon. His time his coming to an end. He

looks down and sees the sun light up the shoreline far below. He shrugs into the warmth of the day.

Around the bend to the right of Nikos's house there are two small houses built by one of the village boys for rent. They are rented now to English. In the first there lives a woman who, while not old, is strange and moves like an old person. She is harmless. Her Greek is awful and, despite lessons every week for which she goes to Xania on the Thursday bus, not improving. She affects a purple beret summer and winter and strolls around the village passing the time with anyone who will. Mostly, it is the old people who give her time. Apart from young Markos who runs his father's ceramics shop. Markos is an odd fish - the woman is old enough to be his mother and yet he seems to flirt with her. Everyone thinks it is odd and everyone laughs but not in his face. As we said, Markos is an odd fish. Odd but violent.

In the apartment next to the strange not-old lady live a couple who keep themselves very private. He works sometimes with Mikhaili's son on the buildings. She is rarely seen but they have cats. Lots of them. And lately they have acquired a puppy. A nice looking little dog but not very bright. There is going to be trouble over that dog. They just don't know how to behave with a dog in a village. There are sheep everywhere and the dog runs around sometimes untended. He means no harm but ...

In the rented apartment that lets directly onto the road Iris lights another Camel, Stanley has gone off to work on the buildings this morning and once more she is alone. The TV is on. CNN is on the TV. Afghanistan or Iraq or somesuch. It's just her and the dog again. It's a lovely day and she'd like to go to the beach but she doesn't like to go out without Stanley. Someone might speak to her - in Greek. No. it'll be another day of washing and ironing. What to cook for tonight? It wasn't supposed to be like this but they ran through their savings so quickly and now Stanley has to work otherwise they'd have to pack everything up again and go back to Manchester. "We've moved 5 times in the last few years". It wasn't supposed to be like this. She slumps at the breakfast bar and sighs. The little dog looks up at her imploringly. That's her third cigarette and still there is no sign of her taking me out for a wee. She knows that there's an opened bottled of gin in the fridge. It beckons but she resists. "Mustn't drink before 6 in the evening". It's a rule they've made for themselves. That's where all the money went last time. That and going out. "We don't go out much, nowadays". She catches herself talking to herself out loud and administers a silent reprimand.

Iris rouses herself and gives the dog a nod. "Just let me get myself dressed". A parody of a smile about her mouth. The little dog runs over to the door and begins to scratch desperately at the jamb. "Bobby, you stop that now. In a minute. I said: We'll go out in a minute" she says in the world weary voice that the little dog knows so well. In all the time he's been living with them, ever since he left his mum at that nice taverna down by the seaside he has never heard her change her tone, Nor him. It's always the same bored, flat, wide-vowelled monotones. The little dog sometimes thinks he will burst his bladder waiting.

At last! She is behind him now, and she has the lead in her hand. Thank God for that! She bends down and a wave of vertigo engulfs her. Her head swims, her temples thud and gall rises in her throat. "Wait there Bobby - I'll be back in a minute". And so Bobby waits, Listening to the sound of dry retching from behind the bathroom door that swings in the north wind. "Humans certainly choose their times to bark". He fixes his gaze on the swinging door, trying hard to take his mind off of his full bladder. Full to bursting. She comes out, at last, and she is wiping her spittle away with some kitchen towel which she scrunches in her fist as they finally leave the house. Her lips are white and her eyes are red. The little dog makes it as far as the first post on the pergola before lifting his leg and letting go of a stream that he felt sure was going to drown him. And then they lurch right.

The afternoon is at its hottest. Iris is nodding in front of the television. CNN still. The little dog jumps up from his basket and rushes to the door barking in the high pitched tone that denotes excitement. He has heard Stanley's footfall. Iris looks up and sees the door open. Sunshine is flooding into the room and it hurts her eyes. The sun is coming in, not through the front door though, but from the balcony windows that she left open after hanging out the washing. The dog knocks over the ironing board in his mad dash to the door and Stanley can hardly get through the door for it. "Iris, are you there? Are you OK? Have you been drinking?". Iris is suddenly on her feet and moving toward the door. Her eyes are still red. "Oh Stanley I've had an awful day. Just awful" and with this she collapses into his arms.

They are sitting, one either side of the faintly ludicrous Formica breakfast bar that subdivides the long thin room into kitchen and living room. They each have a glass of gin and tonic before them. Between the glasses is an ashtray. "Now luv, don't upset yourself. Just tell me what happened." She looks down into her glass and takes a bite, "That fucking Nazi. I fucking hate him. It was all his fault. Who does he think he is

anyway? Nazi bastard! Thinks he can tell me what I can and can't do. Fascist!". Her voice is raised and cracking. Bobby is safely ensconced in his basket. This scares him. Scares him nearly as much as this morning scared him. Bobby shudders a little shudder and tucks his head under his forepaw. "Just tell me what happened but don't upset yourself so."

Over a number of gins, the tonic is finished, the story comes dribbling out. Iris was taking little Bobby for his "morning constitutional" and they had stopped, as usual, outside the big house round the bend. Bobby was doing what Bobby does in the morning and then it all went mad. "That Nazi came out again and started ranting and raving about us using his garden as a toilet for the dog and I said he could poo wherever he liked and that this was a village and that there were sheep that poed wherever they liked and probably in his garden too and how he couldn't tell me what to do or where to do it and that we'd beaten them in the war and Booby was entitles to poo wherever and that if they didn't like it they should go back to Germany!" Another bite, her gin is gone now and so she reaches for Stanley's but Stanley see it coming and picks his glass up. He empties it in a single swallow. "And he was swearing at me in Greek and waving his arms about and I thought he'd explode he was so red in the face and then he kicked little Bobby and said if I did it again he give ma a "big smack"". "He said what?". Silence. "He said what??" again. Silence. "What did he say??? Tell me what he said!"

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Stanley is striding up round the bend and up the rise. His armpits are sweaty and his t-shirt is stuck to his back. He hasn't had his shower. He probably has building dust in his hair. He always has a shower as soon as he gets in from work. Stanley hates to be sweaty. But this has to be sorted and sorted now. Nobody speaks to Stanley's wife like that and gets away with it! Inside, Stanley is jelly. Stanley is probably more frightened than Bobby. Stanley hates confrontation and really wishes he could just curl up in his basket with Bobby but this calls for action. Honour and machismo are at stake. "Bloody Nazi! I'll put a spoke in his wheel. I'll show him! Coming over here acting like he owns the village. With his BMW and his pool. No one speaks to us like that We've got rights, we have!"

Sitting by the side of the road looking down on Kavros where the sun always seems to shine Stanley is finally thoughtful. The sun has dipped

behind the mountain and Kournas is grey now. Stanley doesn't know what to do now. All his bluster, all his resolve, gone in a moment. That moment when the young girl told him that her father had had a heart attack this morning and was in Xania hospital at this moment fighting for his life. Told him in perfect English too. Crestfallen would be a good word for how Stanley feels. And oddly relieved.

Stanley pulls himself back together and trudges home in the cooling shade. "Well that'll learn him anyway. Bloody Nazi! No one talks to my wife like that! And gets away with it."

**Part 4**  
**A Xmas Pre-prandial**

Whiskies, one scotch and one bourbon  
lie cheek by jowl and  
not a yard away a vodka

The bottles distinguishable only  
by their distinctive shapes  
Johnny Walker  
Jack Daniels and  
Smirnoff - Nikolai?

Discarded and empty  
labels washed away by tides  
tops that were thrown away  
long ago are nowhere to be seen

Four by fours and  
four by twos huddle  
atop each other

timber from beach side constructions  
huts and deck chair parlours  
bars and bar fronts  
cast adrift by winter storms  
the white paint leaking through the blue

Gobs of polystyrene with  
drifts of phenol snow  
blowing on the wind

Beside them globs of  
thick black crude oil  
rinsed from tankers returning  
through the Med  
and dead seagulls washed up  
crucified for Xmas  
by the season

ropes and olive nets  
bleached by the deep  
lay disarrayed along the tide line  
discarded or lost?

the sun skirts  
just above the mountains  
to our backs and lights the tops  
of the wavelets smacking on the strand

it warms our backs  
and heads  
and our hearts  
it lights the sand dunes  
picking out the twitches of grass and  
empty never rotting plastic water bottles  
a summer's worth of waste

the girls run freely  
on long ropes snaking out  
from our hands  
snapping sharply taut now and then  
ropes found here  
washed up detached from bouys and nets that  
litter the beach further along  
by the river  
where the girls pause briefly to drink  
of the sweet cold water  
trickling down from the mountains

and every few metres  
another palm frond or  
an olive trunk or  
branch or  
plane tree leaf and  
cuttle fish skeleton

they all cast up here  
disfiguring the pristine beaches so  
beloved by the tourists

making them ours again  
in all their tawdry beauty

the hotels and  
the beach bars  
all closed  
just us  
our dogs  
and  
xmas day

**Part 5**  
**Max's Vintage**

## Max's Vintage

I've just finished a new short story for a very good friend so I thought I'd share it with you all, it's about a man and his dog and it's called:

### Max's Vintage

Liam is sitting and crouching. He is pulling on his shoes while his back complains. He is getting old now but the day is bright and this lightens his heart. Autumn is on them all - a gentle, Cornish autumn - and the hedgerows are full. A mellow fruitfulness. A richness.

Tying his laces carefully, he pulls the lace once more around his ankle and feels the cold, damp nose on his wrist. Max boy, yes we're off out this morning. It's a beautiful day. We'll be off soon. Give me a few minutes. Max is getting old now too. They have grown together over the last ten years, closer than most humans ever get.

Liam is eighty two years old and Max a mere ten, but Max is a dog, a black and tan Dobermann dog, of a physical elegance that Liam has not had for many a year. And so, they are probably each as close to their natural ends as twins might be, contemporaries at last. You have aged more gracefully than I old boy. We have converged at last. You knew we would. And so did I.

Liam's hand seeks out Max's muzzle and caresses it lovingly. Max presses his whole head firmly but slowly into Liam's hand and senses a frailty there, a slight weakness that he has become familiar with in the last year or so, a hint that he recognises in his own traitorous body. The hand moves slowly up over his head and pauses on his stop before continuing, as he knew it would, to the sweet spots behind his ears. They both luxuriate in this closeness for a while until Max shakes his head free and cocks it to the left. Liam listens too. Ah, Max boy, that's the black-bird. Isn't that a beautiful sound? Fair makes you glad to be alive, huh? Come on, lets be on our way. No beach today boy. We're off up the lane today. The other way. You'll get your swim later. Promise. But Max has gone skittering across the kitchen by now.

With his front paws on the closed lower half of the stable door he is

looking out at the buddleia bush, where the blackbirds nest each year and where they have raised at least three broods to his knowledge. He draws a huge volume of air in through his powerful and sensitive nose: buddleia, blackbird, compost, rabbit, fox, grass, rose, bramble. He discerns each separate aroma distinctly but simultaneously. His mind is placing each of the ingredients of this cocktail to its location in the space before him, when he smells Liam coming up behind him. Now that's a smell all its own: warmth, love, respect - so well known now, a smell that goes all the way back to his smallest days - maybe the first smell he was aware of after his mother's. Liam clips the lead to his three row collar.

Out in the lane they are both assailed and overwhelmed by the sight and smells of the rhododendrons, blown now and looking dowdy, frazzled; frayed but fragrant: fragrant to Max at least, though Liam's nose is failing him now. You'll have to be careful Max, the flail will be along for those weeds soon. Next few days. One hand in his pocket he wrinkles the sack that sits there. Max picks up the scent and raises his noble head to turn those gentle brown eyes on him quizzically. Liam laughs. You know boy, don't you? Elderberries it is. You clever thing you. He checks the lane ahead, knowing that Max now knows where they are going, and, assured that they have it to themselves, he unclips his lead.

Max bounds stiffly off nosing the hedges either side as he goes and now and then turning back to check that Liam is OK. This is his only true freedom of movement these days - this, and his capers at the beach. He misses the free stretching, back bending bounding of yesteryear: the onset of arthritis has put paid to those carefree days and on the lead he is all decorum now. No mad headlong dashes. It would not be kind to remind Liam of just how much mobility he has lost himself. More even than he.

They wander along in silent communion, Max leading, until he spies the elder trees and notes that the fruit clusters have turned. He backtracks and comes behind and around to Liam's left. Liam bends only slightly, and from the waist - Max is a tall dog - and Liam reattaches his lead. Here we are boy. You know don't you? He lets them into the orchard. The winds of the last few days have blown apples down and the distinctive smell of proto-cider reeks: Max wrinkles his nose in distaste while Liam has a madeleine moment that transports him back to days of his youth and just-brewed Calvados in the Normandy countryside .

I dreamt last night of elder, Maxy boy, and, in this superstitious county, that is supposed to presage sickness. Not yours or mine, I hope. But then the addle-pated folk hereabouts seriously believe that elder branches can keep vampires at bay. Claim it goes back further than garlic. Fuckwits all. The very same sheep who bend their knee every sabbath, to a god who is so mean that he denies you a soul - or a place in their much vaunted afterlife. Flockwits more like. OK then Max. Let's get to it.

Free to roam again, Max is soon investigating every hedge and shrub (traces of rabbit here and there - a hare was through here last night) checking back on Liam assiduously. But Liam is fine, picking the low-hanging bunches of fruits and plopping them gently into the unrolled sack. The odd purplish, blackish stain seeps damply, darkly through the hessian. The sun is warming their bones and easing the aches in their joints. Is making them feel, momentarily, young again. Max has flushed a pair of wasps from one of the rotting apples and gaily chases them, as they dance just beyond his tender nose. Liam has settled himself beneath an old Pearmain tree and is tucking into a firm, white-fleshed apple, with a relish normally seen only in the flushes of scrumping youth. He is watching Max's game with a smile playing across his face; a smile of pure enchantment. The sack is full and leaking sweetly, stickily, beside him. Max leaps and neatly bites one of the wasps in half.

Come here boy. That's it. Sit beside me. No - the other side, lemon. That's it. Now Maxy, why did you kill that wasp? That wasn't very nice, was it? He wasn't doing you any harm - was he? Max turns a pair of sad eyes on him. They burn like lasers. Max is contrite, and lays his head in Liam's lap, sniffing the sack surreptitiously. Liam regrets the reprimand and leans slowly back against the tree trunk. He savours the moment. Are we having fun Max? I think so, don't you? Now I'm going to close my eyes for a while. You stay here - alright? Nudge me in a few minutes and we'll go back.

Back home they are sitting on the sun terrace. Ann has the kettle on for tea and Max has a big stainless steel bowl of cold, clean water just tucked in behind the herb border, where the sun has begun to cast a shadow. The sack is open before Liam who crouches Arab style - a habit he picked up in his youth and has never questioned. He is picking the stalks from the firm fruits and discarding the bruised and crushed fruits into a

bowl: Ann will make jam from these. The rest are destined to become wine. A late bee buzzes past them breaking the silence and Max looks quizzically at Liam. The herb border fills Max's nose but still he can smell the sick bee. Liam laughs and chucks Max under the chin. It's OK boy. No problem. Let him be! Liam looks up and checks the length of the shadows. Half an hour more here and then I'll take you to the beach. Half an hour will see this lot off. I'll sort them out when we get back. There's time yet, boy.

Ann brings out the tea on a lovely red lacquer tray, that they picked up in an out of the way second hand shop last summer, and settles herself into a little plastic chair. Are you alright crouching like that? Don't fuss darling, you know I'm happiest this way. She strokes Max's head that rests still in Liam's lap. You two didn't overdo it did you? No, we're fine. Liam chuckles. We had a little nap in the shade, thanks. We're fine, and I promised Max his run on the beach. Half an hour's work left here - no more. Will you come?

Max has settled himself on the ground between them. He is looking up and clearly following the conversation. Like the pair of them he is wondering how life could be better and deciding that it cannot. Stretching his front paws out he settles his head between them and closes his eyes. His other senses though are on full alert. The sonorous tones of their voices and the smells of the garden in late afternoon soothe him. The sweet smell of crushed elderberries cloys above all the other scents. Ann and Liam have fallen silent. Time passes contentedly to the gentle rhythm of Liam removing the stalks from clusters of fruit.

You're awful quiet Liam. Are you woolgathering, or are you thinking? Thinking dear. About? Remember I dreamt last night of the elders? Well, as I dozed in the apple orchard I dreamt again of elders. I know I was among the elders, but still and all don't you think it odd? I asked Mrs Potts down at the post office about that, this morning, when I was picking up my pension. You did say the locals had all kinds of superstitions about elders. Well, she said that dreaming of elders presages an illness or bereavement. I'm sure she did - daft old bat! What did I tell you about this being the shallow end of the gene pool? How did such bloody re-tards end up in control of such a beautiful place? They'd have burnt her as a witch a few years back.

Max sits up at Liam's raised voice and watches their body language. He is used to heated discussions and the odd outburst of ranting but he always likes to check. Ann stretches her hand out and strokes him down his neck and chest. It's alright boy, the old boy is just cross at some stupidity. Max collects his feet together into a text book sit, and sympathises silently with Liam. He too, hates stupidity.

Liam unlocks his knees and slowly unfurls himself from his Arab squat, and while he hears only notional creaking, Max actually picks up the very real sound of bone grinding on too-thin cartilage, and sees a shadow of a grimace pass briefly. Hands firmly placed just above his buttocks, Liam is finally unfolded and arches his spine gently backwards before straightening completely. Liam's second sacroiliac joint cracks loudly - to Max - and he catches a whiff of stale sweat: a familiar smell and a particular favourite; a friendly smell and all Liam's. Ann does not wear perfume but her own scent is always masked by something else, whereas Liam always, and reassuringly, smells of Liam. Max licks his testicles and checks his own scent, but does not get up. He is enjoying his family.

Ann drinks the last of her tea and watches Liam, waiting for him to speak. But he stays stubbornly silent. She stretches her hand out to stroke Max behind the ears once more and he almost purrs: a deep and satisfied grunt escapes him. His hind paw comes up to rake behind his ear slowly. Sorry old boy. We shan't be going to the beach today. We're going back to the orchard. Those fruits are just right for winemaking and we're going to make hay while the sun shines - or at least collect berries while we have light left. And this one is going to be for you. Liam sidesteps to where Ann is sitting. I've made up my mind, love. I want to memorialise Max and we can't know whether we shall all do this again. He is getting on, you know. I'm going to have some labels made up to mark this vintage. I know it'll be a great one. And it's going to be Max's vintage, so that when he's gone (a tear breaks loose and dampens his cheek) ... and we both know it's got to happen some day ... then we can raise a glass of Max's vintage to the wonderful memories we shall have. And this is going to be one of them. Despite his aching thighs he squats and pats Max's head. Come on lad. I'll grab the sack. You get the lead, and then let's get cracking. Max is up and ready before him. Lead in mouth, he nudges Ann into action and heads to the gate, looking back and moving forward.

Ann waves them off at the gate and watches, until they reach the bend, through eyes that stream. She recalls a film she saw just after the war, before she even met Liam: *A Boy and His Dog*. Yes that's them. In this moment they both seem strangely young again. She turns and retraces her steps, drying her eyes on her apron as she goes.

**Part 6**  
**On the birth of our first grandchild**

Welcome little Charlie  
welcome to our world  
your world  
you didn't ask to be here  
you owe nobody anything  
the life you have is yours to live  
nobody else's

Do as little harm as you can  
damage as few people as you may  
love yourself first and  
everyone else thereafter  
but  
love yourself

There are people here  
who will care for you  
as best they can  
but they cannot live your life for you

You must find your own way  
and cut your own furrow  
through the field of life  
but keep your head and eyes up  
there are many beauties to see  
- see them all

There are no rehearsals  
no playbacks  
once it is done it sticks  
There is no supernatural  
no afterlife  
no make it all right later on  
get it right as you go  
this life is all you have  
live it wisely  
live it happily



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