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Goodbye Harry

by Ivor John

An unusually pleasant Boxing Day morning. A trickle of sunshine but very blustery. Cuckmere Haven was a short drive and offered a pleasant walk through the beautiful South Downs along the path of well-trodden chalk and hardcore to the narrow estuary, where the river dissolved into the sea.

Our dogs, two shih tzus, despite their short legs and furry elegance, had trotted along the muddy track as if they were tiny dressage ponies with their tails held up proudly like pom-pom plumes. Now they slumped sniffing around them, before the walk back to the car. Harry, the oldest at nearly 14, but still the most enthusiastic of duo. Maisie his younger sibling always needing to slight encouragement from tension on her lead or preferably, if she got her way a few minutes of being carried.

Harry would love to walk, his ears would flap up and down and he would almost bounce. A very timid dog, he would go out of his way to avoid being forced to encounter others. In contrast Maisie, at two-thirds his size would snarl and make sharp sudden head movements like a striking snake toward any other dog which dared to try and sniff her.

After they were driven back to the small cottage in Eastbourne where they lived, they were wet and muddy from their walk. A quick shower to clean their beautiful soft fur. A chicken treat to reward their effort and also the joy they provided, by their uncomplaining unconditional love. Then they could relax, their little baskets lined with towels to dry them.

Harry was coughing, gently at first as if the chicken treat had lodged slightly in his throat. But it didn't ease, in fact got worse. He should go to the vet. On a bank holiday, over Christmas.

"It will be £200 for an out of hours call out, plus the cost of any treatment, is that OK?"

It had to be OK. It would just be a matter of clearing his throat and he'd be back home, to enjoy turkey leftovers and a walk before bedtime.

"Shall we drive them or walk them?"

"We'd better drive them, you may have to wait outside while he's seen too and Masie will get cold."

After completing the covid precautions, the vet said, "I think we should keep Harry for a while, under observation in an oxygen tent for dogs." This was not at all how it was supposed to go, this was not in the script.

A phone call hours later, "I think your dog is in congestive heart failure. He is a very ill dog, he may not make it through the night."

Harry, kind, timid, unconditionally loving beautiful dog Harry. The little dog who occupied fourteen years of our memories, without a bad bone in his little body, didn't come home that night or ever again.

Sitting here, now, on the sofa seeing Harry's unoccupied corduroy basket, remembering is a chair that is hard to sit still in. So hard.